



## **Dark Phoenix Rising** by **RobinDanielle**

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**Summary:** First she was Cinderella, then she was the queen of a desert wasteland. Join Rachel Porter as she continues her adventure. She will have to face the grueling wilderness of Mid-world; her mate's wrath; a dark sorcerer's boundless hunger to completely claim her body, mind and soul...and a lonely gunslinger's selfless love. Not too much to ask of a girl who's only 19, right?

# 1. Chapter 1

*Author's note: This is the sequel/continuation to my story Queen of Ash and Dust.*

Heat. The sun bore down on Rachel, unrelenting. Air. There was none. It was like someone had stuck her and Roland in an oven and put it on bake. Rachel coughed. Her throat was as parched as the deadpan desert that she and Roland had been trudging through for the last three days.

They had run out of water yesterday.

What seemed like an hour later...or maybe it was just minutes, Roland stumbled. He had been doing that a lot lately. She glanced over at him. His beautiful mocha skin gleamed with sweat. Even Rachel had finally started to perspire, though it had taken a while. She suspected it was because of all the demon blood in her. Or because she was carrying a half demon inside her. Or because of all the trips she had taken to the Tower, which felt neither heat nor cold. Who the hell knew? She saw something far ahead. It looked like a building wavering in the sun. She would have rolled her eyes if she had not felt so drained. Of course there would be some random-ass building in the middle of the desert. Why the hell not?

Roland fell to his knees. She stooped down next to him. She brushed her hand against his brow. His skin felt hot to the touch.

"There's a building up ahead," she told him.

"I see it, but I'm...having trouble focusing." He blinked his eyes hard.

Rachel's stomach knotted. She needed to get him to shelter before he had a heat stroke. She leaned in towards him. "I know you can do it. We just need to push a little harder."

Farther still they went. Rachel began to feel like a zombie. Their shadows told no different.

Two buildings. It had been two buildings they had seen. One of them,

the smaller one, appeared to have been a stable. So the larger one must have been a house. Or a waystation. They looked more like sand castles. A rickety rail fence stood around the buildings. Or at least parts of it stood. Roland kicked at one of the rails and it broke in half without a sound. They went through, Rachel letting Roland lead the way. They made for the stable. Roland drew one of his guns. They went inside.

If Rachel thought it was hot outside, it felt like a furnace inside. It was dark. Roland stumbled again. Rachel stood by, ready to catch him. Not that she would be able to, no matter how powerful her demon strength was. He went to the middle of the stable and, after looking around, holstered his gun. He slowly turned to face Rachel... and fell.

"No!" Rachel cried. She ran to him. He was laying on his side. "Roland!" She shook him. Nothing. "Roland!"

She took off her bag and set it next to her. Then she pushed Roland onto his back and laid her hand against his cheek. She felt his pulse at his neck. It was beating erratically. He must have had a heat stroke. She staggered to her feet. Despite the heat, her chest suddenly felt cold. She ran out of the barn. Water. She needed water. She found a well behind the house. She glanced around frantically. An old dusty wooden bucket lay several yards away. She had to fight with the crank. Not only did she have to push hard to get it moving again, but it took several pumps for the water to start coming up. Rachel gasped when she saw the clean, cool liquid. She put her hands under and filled them and drank. She did it again. She filled the bucket up about halfway. She ran to the back door to the house. Locked. She carried the bucket around to the front. There had to be some kind of rag that she could use. Allie's night gown. Or one of her dresses. That would have to work for now.

Rachel hustled back to the stable, her weariness now gone. Roland needed her. He still hadn't woken up yet. She put the bucket down next to him. She should get some water on his neck too and his chest. She pulled open his coat and started undoing his vest. Then she removed the faded red scarf that he wore around his neck and halfway unbuttoned his shirt. She grabbed her bag and pulled out one of Allie's dresses and without hesitation dunked it into the bucket.

She gently dabbed at his face and squeezed some of the water out over his head. Then she did the same with his neck and chest. She buttoned his shirt back up and then poured more water onto it. As an afterthought, she took the vial of blood out of her coat, took her coat off, and bunched it up and placed it under his head.

And she sat back and waited.

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When Roland woke up, he was on his back. Something soft was bunched up under his head. He felt wetness on his face and neck and licked his lips, tasting water. He glanced over and saw Rachel lying curled up on her side next to him, facing him. She seemed to be asleep. Thunder rumbled. He sat up and as he did, he bumped something with his right elbow. He heard a clanging sound and he turned to see a dented tin can lying on its side, water spilling out of it. He cursed under his breath and made a grab for it. He brought it to his lips to drink, and as he did, he heard a moaning sound on the other side of him. He glanced over. Rachel stared up at him with squinty eyes.

"Hey. Sorry I woke you." He reached over and put a hand on her arm.

"Mmm. S'okay. You found the water?"

"Yes. Where did you find it?"

She started to sit up. "There's a pump out back."

He heard her gasp. She put her hand on her stomach.

"What's wrong?"

"Probably just the baby."

He frowned at her tone. He hated that she was so used to pain and drama that she now acted like it was nothing.

"Are you hurting?"

"It was a little jolt, but it's gone." She was sitting up now with her knees bent, her arms resting on them. "It looks like it got darker in

here. Is it still daylight?" She glanced towards the front of the stable.

"I think it's about to rain," Roland commented.

As if on cue, thunder rumbled again. Roland heard a gust of wind and saw dust fly past the door.

"We should probably stay put for now. Wait until it passes. Rest."

Rachel's head fell forward to rest on her knees. Roland set the tin can down. He leaned forward and put his hand on her back. She didn't budge.

He rubbed her back. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I am so tired of being tired, Roland," came her grumbled reply.

He shifted until he was on his knees and put his arm around her, pulling her against him. "I know, dear heart." He sighed and rubbed her arm. "I know."

(((O)))

Rachel turned and buried her head against Roland's chest. The coolness of his shirt was a balm against her skin that was still heated from the sun. She fought back a sob. What in the world would she do without him? She had only known him for a little over a week.

Now she didn't want to be without him.

Once upon a time, she had thought that about Pennywise. But how blind she had been. And naïve. This is what a real man was like. He didn't hunt down children to devour their fear and their flesh. He didn't make people get in car accidents to take their place in a girl's play. Roland was no knight. And he wore no shining armor. But he was there. And he was good. She had thought Roman had been the prince in her fairytale. And maybe he still could be. Maybe there was still hope for them yet. It had been four days now since the fight in Tull. How injured had he been?

Waiting. She was always waiting.

She was done.

"Roland, I need to tell you something."

He put his arms tighter around her and rested his chin on her brow.  
"What is it?"

"The last night we were in Tull...I felt something...in my sleep. It felt like someone's arms were around me...like someone was touching me."

Roland pulled away from her. He grabbed both her shoulders and held her at arm's length. "What? Touching you how? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I thought...It was so real, Roland. I thought..." She opened and closed her mouth.

"Rachel...what do you mean by someone was touching you?"

"My breast. I...I felt someone touching my breast. Playing with it."

Roland turned his gaze off to the side. A look of shock came over him. He still held onto her.

"You were the only one that was next to me that night. Did you...were you like, sleeping or something?"

His head whipped back to her. He furrowed his brow. "I didn't-Rachel..." He let go of her. "I would never touch you..." Roland ran a hand over his face. "My God. I wasn't in the room."

Roland stood. Rachel stayed on the ground. She craned her neck to look up at him. "Roland, I think Walter's been watching me. Does he have a way to watch people? I think he's been watching us."

She stood. Thunder rumbled again, closer this time. She heard rain splatters on the roof.

"Why did you not tell me of this?"

She recoiled at the anger in his voice. Rachel had never heard him

use that tone with her before. She spread her hands out. "Because what difference would it have made?"

Roland rounded on her. "Every difference. I left you alone for minutes. If Walter came to you that fast, then yes he has been watching you. Intensely. And I allowed it."

Now it was Rachel's turn to be angry. "Roland, that was not your fault. You can't help it if Walter's an obsessive, sadistic, super powerful asshole. Hell, I can't even help that shit."

Roland hung his head. "I have done everything. I have been careful how I've looked at you, how I've...how I've touched you..." He shook his head. "For the longest time, I have nothing but my revenge. I have wanted nothing but that. Almost every day I see you suffer. You suffer at Walter's hands, and your...your husband doesn't even bother. He doesn't care. If he did, he would be here. He would be the one caring for you, wanting to make sure you have everything you need. I have nothing to give you. Nothing."

The rain started pouring.

"But I want to be your everything."

Lightning lit up the sky outside. Thunder rumbled. Rachel walked up to Roland and gently placed her hand on his chest.

"You have spirit. You have heart. A good heart. Better than any man I've ever known." She moved her hand over to place it over his heart. She felt it beating strong and steady under her palm. Roland's sad eyes met hers. "You *are* everything, Roland. You are the best of not just what a man should be, but what people should be period. You could have left me in that desert. You could have left me in that town." She dropped her hand. "You said it yourself, you've been here more for me than even Pennywise has. The other night..." She paused. She had to tell him. Had to. "I wanted it to be you. I wanted it to be you that had...put your arms around me."

Roland furrowed his brow.

"I'm serious, Roland. If I would have known that that was your hand



on me instead of Walter's, I wouldn't have minded. I would have been shocked as hell, but I wouldn't have..." She met his gaze again and slowly shook her head. "I wouldn't have minded at all. Because I trust you. I trust you with all my heart. You bring me comfort. You bring me peace. You bring..." She took a deep breath. "You bring me love," she finished in a shaky voice. "You want to put your arms around me, do it. I won't shy away. I won't be afraid. I would welcome it. You want to kiss me too, you just go right on and-"

Her speech was broken off by Roland's lips crashing into hers. She just stood there. She didn't exactly kiss him back, but she didn't shy away either. The kiss was brief and chaste. And when Roland pulled away, Rachel stared at him for a moment before giving him a one-sided grin. When Roland returned the gesture, she couldn't help it. She kissed him. Roland's lips were soft. He responded in kind, and soon she felt his hands snake around her back. There was no fiery passion or desperation in their kiss as there had been in her and Walter's. But it was sweet. And it was gentle. Just like the man who those lips belonged to. She didn't know where this was leading. And she had a feeling Roland didn't either. But for once, she didn't care. She just lived in the moment, enjoying the feel of Roland's lips, the warmth of his embrace, and the sound of the beating of the rain on an old tin roof.

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Their smell was faint when he arrived at the waystation. Pennywise saw a light coming from the stable. They had to have been in there. He went inside, his eyes roving around every inch of the barn. Their scent was strong now. When he finally found them, he stopped short. His hands went into fists.

They were lying in the hay, the gunslinger on his back, and she on her side, his arm around her. He was holding her hand that was lying on his chest, which her head was nestled against. Pennywise knew this embrace. It was not the one of friends or mere traveling companions.

It was the embrace of lovers.

Pennywise almost wished that they had been naked. That he had caught his mate in an actual act of betrayal. But no, she was too good

for that. And of course the gunslinger was as well. He would not have just taken her. Not in the hay like that.

But that was fine. Pennywise was back now. He had rested and he had fed. He was much stronger now. And he would get his revenge on the gunslinger. He would take back his mate. Not through force, but through kindness. And love. The way he should have all this past week. He would win back her affection. And the gunslinger would have no choice but to stand back and watch. The demonic clown grinned at the thought. Let the two lovebirds sleep. Let Roland Deschain think that she had won his heart. Because tomorrow...

Pennywise would crush it.

## 2. Chapter 2

*Pennywise's maniacal laughter echoed throughout the chamber. Rachel was lying naked on some kind of hard elevated slab. She tried to move, but her hands were bound over her head with manacles. Her belly was big and swollen. She felt something tickling the bottom of her belly. She picked her head up. Pennywise's face leered at her in the dim light. He placed his hands on either side of her belly. His gloves were off, his claws elongated.*

*"Time for baby boy to come out yet?" he said in a mocking tone. He tilted his head sideways, drool dripping on her.*

*"Not yet, Pennywise."*

*Walter sauntered into view. Rachel threw her petrified gaze at him.*

*"Walter, please. What's happening?"*

*"Oh don't you worry, sweetness. I made a pact with Pennywise that he is not to hurt you. Or our child." He threw a heated glance at Pennywise.*

*"But why are you doing this? Where am I? Why am I chained up?"*

*"Oh don't you know? The Tower has fallen."*

*Walter came up to her. He put his hand on her belly and started rubbing it.*

*"No," she said.*

*"That's right. Soon I will be king of all chaos and discord. But first, there's just a little something I need to take care of. Just a little ritual."*

*Rachel pulled at her bindings. "You're going to kill me?"*

*Walter shook his head with a chuckle. "I'm not going to kill you, darlin'. But I do need our son for something. Don't worry. It won't hurt. I'll be back in a bit." He patted her stomach. "Pennywise, help her to relax please."*

*Walter turned to leave.*

*"Walter?" Rachel called out in a choked voice. "Walter?" she called more loudly to his retreating back.*

*She felt Pennywise's hands on her upper thighs. "Don't worry. Pennywise will take care of you, yes he will."*

*He nodded his head before lowering it. Rachel felt his tongue on her. She let out a whimper and pulled against her bindings again. She didn't want him to go down on her. She wanted out of here. The room was dark, but there was a pale light shining at the end of it. She let out a moan as Pennywise started licking at her nub. And that was when she saw it. At the end of the room, under the light, an extremely tall figure emerged. It wore a bright red robe. The hood was pulled up. All she saw was darkness within. It's long, pale hand pointed at her. Rachel screamed.*

Rachel woke up. The first thing she saw was a large, pale figure looming over her in the dark. Pennywise. In a rage, she kicked upward, the toe of her boot connecting with his chin. He stumbled backwards.

Rachel sat up. "YOU ARE NOT GETTING MY BABY!" she screamed. "I WILL KILL YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME? I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!"

She made to lunge at him, but someone grabbed her from behind.

"No!"

Rachel fought against Roland, but his grip was like iron.

"No! Stop, Rachel!"

Rachel stopped. She glared at Pennywise. "You are *not* going to touch me again, do you hear me?! You're not going to touch my baby!" She whimpered.

She sagged in Roland's arms, suddenly feeling more tired than she had in days. She let out a choked sob.

"Roland, I *just* want to sleep." She sagged against his chest. His grip on her lightened a bit. She buried her face against his neck. "Why

won't Walter just let me sleep?"

"I don't know." Roland rocked her side to side. "I don't know." He rested his chin on her head. "No one's going to take your baby. Whatever dream you had, it was just that. A dream. Go back to sleep. I'm not going anywhere."

(((((O))))

Roland held Rachel against him. He moved his right hand to cradle the side of her head.

"You have nerve, clown."

Pennywise went into a crouch. "Says the human who has apparently been getting way too familiar with my mate while I have been gone."

"Someone had to be here for her. And if she has lost faith in you, you need to ask yourself about that. You leave her time and again. And each time she gets farther and farther away from wanting to be tied to you."

Roland could tell he had hit a nerve when the clown narrowed his eyes at him, but Roland wasn't done yet.

"I don't know what happened here just now, but I have never seen her like this. She doesn't want you near her. She doesn't want you to touch her. And the fact that Walter's name just came up does not help *at all*." He shot Pennywise a heated look. "She needs peace. She told me that herself a few nights ago. She *cannot* keep going like this. Every time she breaks down, it's worse. If you love her... if you *really* love her, then give her peace. Give her space. Give her whatever she asks for. And then respect it. Respect *her*."

Pennywise stood so fast, Roland removed his hand from Rachel's head and drew his pistol and pointed it at the clown.

"I will *not* be lectured by you, gunslinger! She is mine. Mine!"

The spit flew from Pennywise's mouth. Rachel started to stir in Roland's arms. She stood.

(((O)))

Rachel felt like she was standing outside of herself, watching herself. She strode up to Pennywise and got in his face. When she spoke, her voice was cold and lethal.

"You will *not* talk to him like that again. Do you understand? I am very, *very* tired and I would very much like to be able to get some decent amount of sleep for once in my life. So if you would please," she put her finger over her mouth, "*shhhh*."

Rachel went back to her hay. She didn't even acknowledge Roland as she settled down. She closed her eyes and was soon asleep. She didn't dream this time. But when she awoke it was bright outside. Her legs felt unsteady as she stood. She had cottonmouth bad. As she made her way across the stable, she patted at her coat. The vial was still secure. She still hadn't needed it yet. Maybe Walter was just being paranoid.

She squinted as walked into the bright sunlight. The sun was high in the sky. She glanced left. She didn't see anyone around. Maybe Roland was inside. She made her way to the house. The front door was wide open. The porch groaned in protest as she crossed the threshold.

"You said there's meat in there? Bring that too."

Rachel's brow knit at Roland's voice. Who could he have been talking to? She rounded a corner. Roland stood by a hole in the floor. An open door was attached to it. Must have been a cellar. He glanced up at the sound of her approaching footsteps. She started to come to him, but he held his hand out. She stopped. He came to her and gently grabbed both of her arms. He gently moved her aside.

"What is it?"

"Shhh."

Rachel glanced quickly at the cellar. It must have been Pennywise down there.

"How are you? Did you sleep well?"

Roland's voice was hushed. Yep. Definitely Pennywise.

"I slept good. How are you?" she asked softly.

"Any pain? Nausea?"

Rachel couldn't help but grin. Leave it to Roland to keep the conversation on her.

"I'm fine." Her eyes met Roland's. She loved how the light from outside shown in them. "Very fine."

She tilted her head up and at the same time he brought his down. They kissed. Quietly. Passionately. He placed his hands on her hips and she rested hers on his upper arms. She broke it off first.

"I am so sorry about last night," she whispered frantically. "I didn't know he was going to just show up like that."

"It doesn't matter," he said quickly. He kissed her forehead. "We are not doing anything wrong. If he wants to fight for you, let him fight."

"It's *not* that easy," she whispered back.

Rachel heard heavy footsteps coming up the cellar. She and Roland pulled away from each other. The footsteps came closer, then stopped.

"Roland?"

It was Roman's voice. Roman was down there.

"What?" Roland responded.

"Can you grab them? I'm too tall to carry them all the way up. I don't want to drop them."

Roland bent down and stuck his arms in. Rachel raised an eyebrow. Roland and Roman were actually working together? What the hell had happened after she fell back asleep? Her mouth fell open after she saw what Roman was passing up to him. Cans. Very dusty cans, but still. Some of them looked like they held green beans and the

others either corn or some other kind of bean. And there was corned beef as well. Rachel let out an audible gasp.

"Roland," she breathed. She went to stand right next to him.

"I know," he answered. "What a feast."

He glanced over at Rachel with a playful grin on his face. She beamed at him in return. If Roman wouldn't have been right there, she probably would have kissed him, she was so excited. Maybe she should kiss Roman instead. Despite the asshole that he was, he was still her mate and he was the one who had found the food. Roland set the cans down.

"Do you want me to go back? There's more?" Roman smiled when he noticed Rachel. "Hey, princess."

Rachel's mouth fell open. She quickly turned it into a grin. He hadn't called her that in ages.

"H-hey, honey," she stammered in response. "What you got down there?"

"Cans. Lots of them. Want to come see?" He gestured sideways with his head.

"Uh. Sure." Rachel bent down to inspect the stairs and that was when the smell hit her. It was a pungent smell, damp and rotten. After spending days in the odorless desert, she started to feel nauseated.

"Ohhh." She put her hand over her mouth and turned away. "Oh, God." She gagged.

"Kitten?" Roman called out.

Rachel was so nauseated, she started to feel lightheaded. The heat wasn't helping either. She gagged again.

"Here. Let's get you outside." Roland's hand was on her back. He started to lead her away.

"Roland? What's wrong with her?" Roman called.



"Nauseated. We'll be right back," Roland called back.

Rachel couldn't make it to the porch fast enough. As soon as she got there, she went to the edge and threw up. There wasn't much. And her stomach hurt afterwards. She rested her hand on it. Son. That's what Walter had called their baby. Baby boy, Pennywise had said also. She crouched at the edge of the porch. Walter had given her a son. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what this newest fetus would look like. Would he have brown eyes like her or deep blue like his father? Would he be kind or would he be a bully, a man who had to have his way no matter what it cost him or the other person?

But above all, there was one thing she would not have to worry about.

His father would not want to eat him.

Rachel almost laughed. What kind of normal person would even have to wonder about that?

She stood and turned. Roland and Roman were both standing there watching her. Roland was holding a wet rag.

He walked up to her with his hand outstretched. "Here."

She took the rag and pressed it against her face. The water was cool. Oh what it would be like to have another bath. When she was done wiping her face and neck, she folded up the rag. She needed to tell them at least some of her nightmare.

"Me and Walter are having a boy. Or at least that's what he said it was last night...in my dream."

"You saw Walter?" Roland asked.

Rachel nodded. "And Pennywise." She cast a glance at Roman. "I was big and pregnant. I was...lying on some kind of hard slab. My hands were chained up above my head." She walked past Roland to stand at the steps. "They were both there." She turned to face Roman, her posture now straight, her voice more steady. "Pennywise asked if the baby was about to come out. He laughed." She raised an eyebrow at her husband, who sheepishly looked away. She turned back to

Roland. "Walter said he wanted to do some kind of ritual. He didn't say what though. I've had three dreams about Walter. Somehow this was the worst one yet."

She was silent for a moment. A light breeze picked up the dust and swirled it around them.

"What happened next?" Roman asked.

Rachel swallowed. "Then Walter left. A moment later, I saw something standing back behind Pennywise. Something tall. Or someone. They were wearing a red robe."

"Fuck," Roman muttered. He ran his hands through his hair.

Rachel frowned at him. "What? You know who that was?"

"You saw the fucking Crimson King. There's no one else that could have been. Fuck." Roman put the palm of his hand over his mouth.

"W-what does that mean?" Rachel glanced back and forth between the two men.

"Walter is working for the Crimson King. If you had a dream about Walter bringing you and your baby to him, that's not good at all," Roland said with a shake of his head.

Rachel's breath hitched in her throat. She placed a hand on her belly. "Sooo what do we do now?" she asked the gunslinger.

"We eat. We rest some more. Early tomorrow morning we set off again. We make for the mountains."

"We head north," Rachel idly remarked. Her hand came up to stroke the choker at her neck. Was there no road that led to a happily ever after for her and Roland. And then she remembered something.

"I'm going to refill our water. Go and get something to eat. The sooner we get ready to leave, the better."

Roland walked past her. When he was off the steps, Rachel called to him. He stopped and turned.

"There was another dream I had. A good one. The first night I was here."

"What was it?" Roland asked.

She smiled at him. "I was watching Eleanor run around in some flowers. We were at the base of Tower. There was someone with us."

He gave her a small smile. "Really? Who was it?"

"You."

Roland just stood and stared at her. So she continued.

"I didn't even know you. But you were there. With me and my daughter. I think... I think Maturin sent me that dream. To let me know of what was to come."

"But your daughter is—"

"Gone. I know. But the Tower's not. I'm gonna hold on to that dream, Roland. I'm gonna hold on to it. To fight for it. I'm gonna fight for my daughter. And my son. And for everyone else in my life who's worth fighting for." Her grin widened. "I will make my dream come true. If you want it."

Roland nodded his head. "Then I will fight for it too. Nothing would make me happier."

He turned and walked off. Rachel turned...and came face to face with Roman. The look on his face she knew all too well. She had just recently seen it— the day she confessed about kissing Walter.

Her whole body was on edge as she walked past him into the house. She hadn't really paid attention when she had first gone inside. Pieces of broken chairs laid scattered about. The table was still in one piece though.

"You want to tell me what that was about?"

"No," Rachel answered flatly.

Roman was right behind her now. Her back was so tense, her muscles were probably one giant knot.

"Are you cheating on me?"

She flinched when his hand reached out to touch her unbound hair. She forced herself to breath.

"No."

Roman's breath was against her temple now. "You sure?"

He had seen something. He had to have seen something. And then it hit her. He had. When she had woken up the previous night, Pennywise had been standing over her.

He had seen her in Roland's arms.

"I asked him to hold he a couple of times while I slept. That's it. I was...scared of Walter."

Roman snorted softly. "And the scary part is that you expect me to believe that."

Rachel whipped around. "It's true. I went into the Tower again after I passed out. I heard Walter calling me. I woke up in my bed. Roland and Allie were there. I was scared. So yes, I asked Roland to sleep with me like that. And every night since then. But goddamn it, Roman, you don't know what it's like. You don't know what it's like to go to sleep and worry that someone's going to show up and molest you in your sleep or-"

"Whoa, whoa!" Roman held his hand up palm forward. "Walter did what?"

Rachel stared at Roman aghast. She wasn't planning to tell him about that.

"I better go see if Roland needs help." She tried to step around him, but Roman barred her path.

"What did Walter do to you? Answer me, Rachel."

She tucked in her bottom lip. "H-he showed up in my sleep and...started touching my breast."

Roman's eyes were murderous. "Where was Roland?"

"He says he left for a little bit."

"And that's when it happened?"

Rachel nodded. "Roman, what are you getting at?"

Rachel heard footsteps coming. Roland appeared in the doorway. He stopped short though, when he saw the couple.

"What happened?" He asked.

"You tell me," Roman said coolly. "My wife says someone molested her in her sleep. Do you know of this?"

Roland passed a quick glance at Rachel. "She told me this."

Roman slowly advanced on the gunslinger. "And you were sleeping next to her at the time. Is that true?"

"I had left for several minutes. But I went back."

"And Walter just..." Roman shrugged, "conveniently showed up in that timespan."

"I would never touch your wife in that manner."

Roman was in Roland's face now. "But you sure jumped in bed with her as soon as she asked. Didn't you?"

Rachel's heart was pounding. Not too long ago she had seen a confrontation that started out just like this. And who had been the last man standing? Not Chris, that was for sure.

"I did what she asked her to do. What she needed me to do. I was there for her."

"And if she would have asked you to fuck her, would you have done that too?"

"Roman!" Rachel stalked up to them. "That is enough. Me and Roland have done nothing wrong. I know it was Walter in my bed that night. You and Roland are both big men. And yes I know what you both feel like against me. That wasn't what I felt. Those were Walter's arms around me. Which means that was his hand on me too. I don't know if he's watching me or what, but goddamn it, I am very fucking scared. And if you don't want another man to comfort me, then do. It. Yourself!"

Roman whipped around to face her. His eyes were like daggers, but so were hers. But there was no backing down this time. She couldn't afford it anymore.

"And if you accuse me of cheating on you one more time..." Now it was time for her to get in his face, "the next time you leave me...Will. Be. Your. Last."

Roman swallowed. She had gotten his attention. Again. Except this time, the stakes were much higher. Roland had been lucky that Pennywise loved her. Or maybe not. Because if he didn't, they wouldn't be once again having this conversation. But did she really want Pennywise to leave? She remembered her nightmare the night before. Would Pennywise join up with Walter if they broke up? What would that mean for Rachel and Roland's relationship?

And more importantly, what would that mean for their mission?

### 3. Chapter 3

Rachel put her sleeve over her mouth, coughing as more dust went up into her nose and mouth. Roman thumped her several times on the back.

"How long have you been in the desert?" he asked snidely.

Rachel coughed some more. "Fuck you. Most of it stays on the ground."

Roman held his hands up in surrender. "Just trying to help."

"Well don't. I don't-"she sneezed, "I don't need to be reminded any more than necessary about the fact that I'm probably never gonna go home again."

"Don't say that," said Roman.

"There is a village of seers in the mountains," Roland told Roman. "When this is over, we can go to them. They should have one that will at least take you close to your home."

Roman gestured towards Roland and raised his eyebrows at Rachel like 'see?'

"I would love to go home," Rachel said in a small voice as she sloshed the contents around in the can of beans Roland had just opened for her.

"I'm sure everyone would be happy to see you," Roman said in a soothing voice.

"They probably all think I'm dead. I don't even know if the kids made it out of your lair."

"I'm sure we can find out." Roman gave Rachel a small smile.

Actually there was someone who would probably be able to tell her. If Walter could keep an eye on her, he probably had ways to see across realms. What had he been up to these last few days? She

hadn't heard from or seen him. She decided to give him a quick mental nudge.

*"Walter...I hope you are well. Please be well."*

She stared at the fine layer of dust on the kitchen window.

"Rachel."

She felt a hand on her arm. Heard her name again. She blinked and turned around. Roland had his hand on her shoulder.

"I asked if you were alright," he said.

She smiled at him. "Yeah. I guess I'm just...tired."

It was then that she noticed that she was fingering her star pendent. She dropped her hand and cast Roman a sheepish glance.

"Have you heard from him recently?" Roman gestured with his chin towards her choker.

Ugh. Why did she have to keep wearing that stupid thing. She shook her head. "Not since the night of the kiss. But he did say in the note that he left that he had some things to take care of."

"So you haven't heard anything since the earthquake?" Roland inquired.

Roman furrowed his brow at the gunslinger. "Earthquake?"

"The last morning we were in Tull, there was an earthquake."

"It destroyed Sylvia Pittston's house. Remember the preacher that me and Roland went to see? The one who sent the people of Tull on us?" Rachel said.

Roman raised an eyebrow. "Must not have been much of a house."

"It wasn't," Rachel replied. She shook up her can some more. "I think Walter tried to talk her out of it. The mob."

Roman stuck his hands in his pockets. "What makes you think that?"



Rachel told Roman about her and Roland's second and last visit to Sylvia. She made sure to tell him about the handprint on Sylvia's face. Roman paced back and forth as she spoke, a thoughtful look on his face.

When Rachel was done, Roman shook his head. "The nerve. The *absolute* nerve. He really thinks of you as his."

"Well you got to hand it to him, he sure shows dedication when he sees something that he wants." *Unlike some people I know.*

Roman shot her a glare.

"Just saying," Rachel muttered.

After a very quiet lunch (Rachel tried very hard not to linger her gaze on Roland for too long) the two men went back to gathering cans. Rachel announced that she was going to search the house to see if there was anything they could salvage for the road. The first room she went to was a bedroom. The bed was meager, and like everything else she had seen so far in the house, it was covered in dust. She remembered in High School when her American History class had learned about the Dust Bowl. How those poor people could have lived like this for a whole decade was beyond her. She saw meager dresser and was about to open a top drawer, when a whispering voice in her head stopped her.

*"Go to the stable."*

She drew an intake of breath. Walter. He was there. Rachel fled the room, but slowed it down to go past Roland, who was at the cellar again. He didn't even look up. She felt like a naughty teenager trying to sneak past her parents and felt a pang of guilt towards Roland. Roman might have deserved this in a way, but not him. But still her heart pounded at the thought of seeing Walter again. She took a deep breath and blew it out through her mouth as she crossed the distance between the house and stable.

What was she doing? She should be ignoring him right now. But no, she was the one who had called him. She grinned deviously. Like a moth to a flame, he had come. And now she was doing the same back

at him.

"Sooo going to hell," she muttered as she got to the stable door.

She whirled around, but no one had followed her. So she went inside. She coughed again. The stable was sweltering. She felt like she could barely breathe. This was stupid. If she passed out right here, there would be no one to stop Walter from kidnapping her. Or toying with her body again.

She made a ponytail with her hands. "Fuck what was I thinking?"

"The same as me, apparently."

Rachel dropped her hair with a gasp and whirled around. Walter was standing right behind her.

"Uh...hi." Rachel was already feeling short of breath as it was, but to have the object of her darkest lust standing mere inches from her... she was practically wheezing.

Walter's dark gaze scanned her face. "Sweetheart, you do not look well."

She didn't feel well at all, either. Her body was starting to feel heavy. And she was having trouble forming coherent thoughts.

"You think you would be used to this heat by now. Here. Lie down."

Walter grabbed her arm, but she pulled away. "No."

"You think I'm just gonna let you collapse right here at my feet? Not gonna happen." He gave a shake of his head. He leaned down towards her. "I said. **Lie. Down.**"

Rachel gasped as she felt an invisible force pull her back. She pulled away and it released her. "No. I have questions for you."

Walter scanned her face again. "Interesting. It doesn't work on you either."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him. "I haven't heard from you in days. I

don' know why I care, but I do."

"Well now you know what it feels like to have someone worried."

"Wha-"

Rachel opened and closed her mouth like a fish. The Tower. He must have been talking about when she was in the Tower.

"Well I'm fine. I'm here aren't I?"

Walter grinned. "Yes, you are."

He reached up to touch her cheek. He rubbed his thumb along her chin. Rachel closed her eyes. His thumb went to her lips. Normally this would have sent a tingle through her, but she felt like she was baking.

"So hot. It's so hot in here." Her voice sounded distant in her ears.

She should be a thousand miles away from this man. Why did she come again?

Walter grabbed her arm with his other hand. "Come over to the hay with me."

He led her to the hay where she and Roland had slept just the night before.

"There's some water here. Take off your coat. And your blouse."

Rachel took off her coat. She moved like a drunk person. She laid her coat in the hay and started to unbutton her blouse. Why was she listening to him? Because she was as hot as Hades. And he had already seen her naked before. What difference did it make now?

"Aaaand kneel down for me please."

Rachel knelt with her back to him.

"Move your hair aside."

She did as she was told. She heard the sound of something sloshing

around in water. Several seconds later, a cool, wet rag touched her back. Water ran down her in rivulets as Walter ran the rag along her neck.

"Ohh my God. Yes."

He ran the rag along her back. She felt water run down her butt crack. Rachel closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. She felt her body heat begin to cool off. The rag was back on her left shoulder. He drug it down her arm.

"Would you like me to do the other side?"

Rachel's eyes snapped open. "I can uh...do it. Thanks."

"Suit yourself."

Walter handed her the rag. She wiped her face first. Then her other arm. Then she did her chest. She felt her face heat up as she focused on each breast. Then she ran the rag down to her stomach. Rachel let her posture sag when she was done. Here she was in the barn with Walter. Again. Half naked with him. Again.

She handed him the rag over her shoulder. "Thank you."

He took it. "Well you are welcome. Feel better?"

She still didn't look at him. "I don't feel like I'm gonna pass out anymore if that's what you mean."

"Good." Walter gave her a pat on her back and stood. "Because you know I wouldn't be able to leave you like that."

Rachel heard the rag splash in the bucket. "I guess not." She grabbed her shirt and started to dress herself.

"So what about your other problem?"

Rachel stood, her shirt half buttoned. She tilted her head sideways at Walter. "Other problem?"

"Of course. You didn't think I would think your health is the only

thing you're concerned about, do you?"

Rachel scowled at him. She finished buttoning her blouse. "I don't see what you mean."

"Come on, my dear." He leaned against the nearest stall wall. "Your nuisance that you can't seem to get rid of. Your husband."

Rachel scoffed at him. "What makes you think I want to get rid of my husband?"

"Well the fact that you and the gunslinger can't seem to keep your hands or your lips off each other might give me an idea."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him. "It was just two kisses. Why do you care?"

He pushed himself away from the wall. "I care because your problem is the same as mine. Pennywise."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him. "What about him?"

He approached her like a cat stalking a mouse. "Do you really want him near our child? And what happens if he loses control with you?"

"I don't know." Rachel backed up until she was against the wall. "He hasn't hurt me yet. And the baby's not due for months."

Walter was inches from her now. "I don't think you understand. I don't *want* Pennywise anywhere near you."

Rachel couldn't believe it. The nerve. "But we...we're mated. We're together. And besides, he's been coming and going and you didn't give a shit before." Rachel knew she was walking a thin line, but there was no way she would let Walter boss her around. "And besides, Roland can protect me. So I don't see what your problem is because you're not fucking around hardly anyway."

Walter grabbed her arms so fast, she didn't have time to take a breath. He slammed her against the wall. His intense gaze met hers and Rachel could do nothing but gasp as waves of emotions spilled onto her—his emotions. Annoyance, anger, lust. Each one as strong

as the next. Rachel kept gasping, her body growing weak under the onslaught. But there was one emotion that was so buried, she just caught a mere tendril of it. But it was definitely there.

Love.

Walter did care for her.

Her eyes widened in shock. But still she did not break her gaze. It was like it was just the two of them left in the world.

Walter was falling in love with her.

It was like a weight had been lifted. He lowered his face towards hers. He was going to kiss her.

And she was going to let him. Because there was nothing else. No one else. His lips were inches from hers.

*BANG!*

Rachel squealed and squeezed her eyes shut, her whole body tensing up. Walter was dead. He had to be. Yet she still felt pressure on her right arm. She opened her eyes. Walter was still standing in the same spot. She saw him playing with something in his right hand and when he held it up for her, Rachel's heart almost stopped.

It was a bullet.

Rachel's gaze once again met Walter's.

*"Do you really think he could save you from Pennywise? I am the only one who can protect you. The only one who can bring you peace."*

Rachel shook her head.

"Rachel! Whatever he is telling you, do not listen to him."

Rachel heard Roman's voice, but it was like her mind refused to cooperate."

"Oh don't you worry, Pennywise. I'm not telling her anything she

hasn't already figured out," Walter called back.

"Let her go, Walter!" Roland demanded.

"Am I restraining her?" Walter removed his other hand and held both his hands up. He backed up a space.

Rachel still couldn't move. It was like her body had turned to putty now that the initial shock of the gunshot had worn off.

"I don't want any protection if it has to come from you," she told Walter weakly. "And as far as peace...there is none in a world where demons are involved."

Walter cupped his hand over his ear. "I'm sorry. I don't think the back row heard you. Can you," he gestured to Roman and Roland, "say that again?"

"I don't want to live in a world run by demons!" she hollered.

Walter gave her a lopsided grin. "Well how 'bout that? The truth finally comes out," he said in a casual voice. "So we have an agreement then?"

Rachel wanted to strangle him. But she refused to let him tell that he was getting the best of her. If Walter wanted to play the game, she would appease him.

For now.

"Fine. We have an agreement. But I need you to do something for me too."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"You want me to reduce the *stress* in my life? No more visits while I'm asleep. No more crazy dreams either. And you're going to leave me and Roland in peace. Since you're so sure you're going to win in the long run anyway, I'm sure you can handle that."

Walter grinned. "Well it looks like we got a negotiator. You got it."

Rachel didn't move. In fact, no one did. So she took it that she was okay to leave. She walked past Walter without giving him a second glance.

"Just remember what you're walking away from," Walter called after her. "There's a reason why the sun and the moon can never be together. You know that."

Rachel kept on walking. She tried to look straight ahead so that she wouldn't look either Roman or Roland in the eye. They both moved aside to let her pass.

"The North Star never wavers, Rachel," she heard Walter call.

She stopped short right outside the stable and let out a shaky breath. Walter cared for her. She had figured as much some time back. And she had told Sylvia so right before the preacher woman had tried to attack her. But feelings were stronger than words and she had felt Walter's. She had felt them strong and true.

And what scared her most of all was...her feelings mirrored his.

(((O)))

Roland barely noticed Roman leave. When he walked into the barn and saw Rachel pinned to the wall by Walter, his lips mere inches from hers, he had automatically drawn his gun. Of course he wouldn't have been able to kill Walter. But he had distracted him, and that was better than nothing.

"What kind of deal did you make with her?" he asked Walter.

"Nothing you need to worry about." Walter bent to pick up Rachel's coat. "In fact, it might actually help your cause."

"What do you care about my *cause*?"

Walter stood. He dusted off the coat. "Because right now, it is the same as mine. To get rid of Pennywise."

(((O)))



Rachel put a hand to her forehead as she trudged her way back to the house. She needed to get out of this sun. She was still feeling woozy and starting to get a serious headache.

"You want to tell me what that was about?"

Rachel didn't even bother to look at Roman. "No."

"So he just showed up again?"

Rachel sighed. "Yes."

"Could you tell that he was here?"

"Yes."

Roman grabbed her arm. "And you went to him? You actually went to him? What in the hell are you thinking, Rachel?"

Rachel stared aghast at Roman.

(((O)))

"Why would you want to help me?"

Walter made his way across the stable. "Who said I want to help you? I want to help her."

He held out the coat to Roland. Roland took it.

"And why would you want to help her? I can't imagine it's because of her child."

(((O)))

"Why in the fuck did you go to him, Rachel?"

Rachel tried to pull away from Roman. "You're hurting me."

(((O)))

Walter grinned at Roland. "Oh I think you know why. Like I said...my cause is the same as yours."

Roland narrowed his eyes at Walter. Something wasn't right. He knew that Walter lusted after Rachel. But there had to be more to it than that. But there was something else that bothered Roland even more. Rachel hadn't been fighting Walter. At all. Had Walter done something to her? Used his persuasion? Or was she fine with him having her like that? What would Roland have seen if he had walked in just minutes later? He frowned at the thought.

"You just stay away from her."

Walter pursed his lips. "Are you sure you want that? Have you seen her? I mean really seen her? This heat is not agreeing with her at all. In fact, if she wouldn't have called me when she did, she might have had a heat stroke."

So Rachel was feeling ill. And she had called on Walter. Instead of going to Roland. He sighed.

"You helped her."

"Don't I always?"

"But why come to you? I could have-"

Walter held a hand up to silence Roland. Roland almost let out a retort and that's when he heard it. It was faint, but it was definitely raised voices. Rachel and Roman were arguing. Loudly.

Roland's eyes met Walter's and for once he was certain his enemy's thoughts mirrored his own.

Protect the girl.

(((O)))

"Why can't I just be enough for you, Rachel?"

"Roman, let go!"

Rachel tried to twist her arm. Roman was seriously starting to scare her. She had never seen him like this with her before. If he wasn't already a demon, she would swear he was possessed by one. She tried

to access her Tower magic, but a stabbing pain shot through her head.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Ahh!" she cried out.

She started to sink to her knees.

"Rachel?"

She started to see white flashes behind her eyes. She dropped to her knees, but instead of letting her go, Roman went down into a crouch with her.

"Rachel, what's wrong?"

"Let her go!"

Rachel felt Roman's hands release from her. She heard a loud scuffling sound. She was hit by a dizzy spell and started to sway. She put her hands to her temples.

"Why do you have to keep hurting her?" Roland said in a growling voice.

"I didn't *do* anything to her. *She's* the one who keeps running around on me."

"He had her up against the wall."

"Did you see her fighting him?"

"No, but I also saw the fear in her eyes."

"And you really think she's still afraid of him?"

Back and forth they went. The pain in Rachel's head was so intense, she was doubled over. Did none of them notice her? Her head was almost between her legs. She felt a slight pressure on the top of her head. Felt the pain being drawn upwards. She whimpered. As soon as all of the pain left, she collapsed. She felt arms around her. She thought she faintly heard someone call Walter's name. She heard Walter respond, but the words sounded jumbled. She just wanted to

sleep. She rested her head against Walter's leg. As she drifted to sleep, she felt herself be lifted.

Then felt herself blink from existence.

## 4. Chapter 4

*Author's note: I am so sorry that it's taken me so long to update. I just got back from Florida a couple of days ago and I didn't work on my story at all while I was there except for literally the first couple of paragraphs. Hope you all had a great Easter for those of you who celebrate it and I hope you enjoy this new chapter.*

She wasn't in the desert anymore. That was the first thing Rachel realized when she woke up. The air was at a comfortable cool temperature. She was in a bed. It was dark with just a hint of light shining in the corner of what she now realized was a room. A bedroom. The wooziness and pain in her head were gone. But her stomach felt unsettled. She rubbed her hand across it and felt silk. She sat up and pulled the covers back, glancing down at herself as she did so. Dark silk that must have either been black or blue adorned her body. The gown had lace straps instead of sleeves and the bodice was trimmed in lace.

She glanced to the right. A large bookshelf stood next to a desk. A garment lay draped over the chair. A robe perhaps? Right next to the chair sat two very familiar objects: her vial and choker. Her eyes grew wide as she remembered the last thing that had happened to her. She and Roman had argued. She had tried to use her magic against him and her head had severely started hurting. And then Roland had showed up. And Walter. And then all had gone dark.

Was Walter here somewhere? Was this his room she was in? Was this his bed? Her breath caught in her throat as she idly ran her hand over the soft sheets. Did he sleep naked?

*Get yourself together, damn it,* she thought.

She needed to get out of there. Wherever she was. She needed to find Roland. She got out of bed and breathed a sigh of relief as she wasn't hit with any sense of lightheadedness. She went to the desk and grabbed her robe. It was the same color and texture as her gown. Had Walter undressed her? Had he done anything to her as she lay unconscious. She felt her face heat up, though not in anger this time.

She took a shaky breath. "I will *not* let him get to me like this."

She pulled the robe on and as she was getting her left arm through, the door opened. Walter came in. He paused when he saw her.

"Well it's nice to see you up and about."

She finished pulling her arm through the sleeve. "Um...yeah. You know me. Not one for just lying about." She pulled her hair out of the robe.

"So I take it you're feeling well?"

She nodded. "Feeling good actually. My stomach's a little queasy though."

Walter pointed at the vial. "Drink some of that. That's why I gave it to you."

Rachel glanced at the vial. "I actually haven't needed it yet."

She glanced back at Walter. He was now standing right in front of her. "Not yet. But I still want you to drink it."

Rachel stared up at him. Why was he being so nice to her lately? And so accommodating. He had saved her twice now from having a heat stroke and he was constantly asking her how she was feeling. And then commanding her to take care of herself, of course. Normally she would have rolled her eyes at the thought, but then she was used to alpha males. She lived her life among them now.

"What happened to Roland and Roman?"

Walter closed the distance between them, his hands laced behind his back. "Why are you so stubborn?"

"Why do you care so much for my wellbeing?" She raised an eyebrow at him.

The corner of his mouth lifted into a grin. He turned to face the desk. "Both of them are well. Or as well as can be expected."

"So you've seen them? Since you've taken me, you've seen them?"

Walter picked up the vial and held it up in front of him as though studying it. "I'm not asking again, Rachel."

*Shit.* Rachel folded her arms. There really was no winning with them. "Fine. I will drink some of your blood if you tell me what's going on with Pennywise and Roland."

"You think I'm going to do that? What if you see something that you don't like? I'm not going to stand there and have you begging me to send you back to the creature who doesn't give a rat's ass about you. Or Roland the Eld."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him. She held her hand out and Walter handed her the vial. "You think I won't try to reach out to them?"

Walter shrugged. "Be my guest. Not that I'm sure you'd be able to handle long distance."

Rachel's hand paused halfway to her mouth, which was open to take a drink. "Long distance?" she said in bewilderment. "Just where the hell are we?"

Walter put his hand on her wrist. "If you do not drink..." he said in a low voice, "I am going to physically put you back in that bed. And then I'm going to physically restrain you so that you cannot move. And no matter how loud you scream..." he leaned in towards her, "there's no one who will come for you."

Rachel raised her eyebrows. The last thing she needed right now was any kind of interaction with Walter that involved ending up in bed with him, sexually or not. Her eyes on him, she raised the vial to her lips and took a swallow. A bittersweet taste flooded her mouth and throat. There was no forgetting the taste of Walter's blood. Even Pennywise's had a distinct flavor to it. Not that she had drunken anyone else's besides him and Walter's. She watched Walter watching her, his hands on his hips, and a blush crept into her cheeks. He had such a commanding presence. She corked the vial and placed it gently back on the desk.

"So now what? I take it you're not going to bring me back now that you have me."

"Do you want me to bring you back?"

His question was so straightforward and unexpected that it shocked her. "Well I...don't miss the heat. But I would like Roland to at least know that I'm alright. And I would very much like to know where I-"

She couldn't even finish. Walter's lips slammed into hers. She opened her mouth to protest. Big mistake. Walter's tongue slipped inside. She took a shaky breath. Her tongue found his. She clutched at his jacket and his hands slid inside her robe, around her back. He forced her to back up until she hit the bed. Walter pulled back from her and ran his hands up and down her sides.

"Oh what you do to me." He breathed heavily. "I could fuck you right here. Strip that pretty little body of yours. And fuck you." He started kissing her again.

Walter dug his hands into her hips. He started to push her onto the bed with his body. She wanted this. Oh did she want this. But it was too wrong. For so many reasons. Plus she really wanted to find out what happened to Roland.

She broke the kiss and placed her hands on his chest. "Walter. I just woke up. I almost had a heat stroke."

"You're fine, baby girl," he crooned.

Walter leaned in towards her again, but she gently pushed him back.

"Walter, please. I can't. I have too many doors open right now. And yes, you are one of them. I will admit that. But I just can't. It's not fair to either of us. You know I'm worried about Roland. And I just..."

She stopped. She needed to let him see. To feel how she really felt. She remembered back in the stable when he had forcibly projected his feelings onto her. He stood there watching her, actually waiting for her to continue. So she let herself relax—and told him what she couldn't put into words.



(((O)))

Walter was totally unprepared for the onslaught of emotions. They weren't strong, but they were many—fear, love, lust, anxiety, joy (what was that one doing there? How could she possibly feel any joy about anything with the way her life was going?) and one other that stuck out right under fear, that truly shocked him more than anything—peace.

Walter felt truly perplexed at this woman standing before him. It was like no matter what happened to her anymore, she was at peace with it. Yes she was afraid, she wouldn't have been human if she wouldn't have been afraid. Her brown orbs stared back up into his. Anyone who wouldn't have known her would have thought her the picture of innocence.

Peace. Did it have something to do with the Tower? The gunslinger? The fact that she was now free from the clown? All of the above?

(((O)))

Walter didn't say anything, which kind of worried her. Rachel sighed. "I still have too much on my plate right now. And at the top of it all at the moment is Roland." She glanced down at her hands which were still on Walter's chest. "He has been *so* good to me, Walter. If you're not going to let me go back to him, then please, *please* let me know that he's alright. And let me let him know that I'm alright. And then we'll go from there."

(((O)))

Walter turned away from her. Turned his back to her. She wasn't fighting him. Peace. Could he really do this? Could he really have a life with her? Have her by his side and have her actually be okay with it? Normally he would have been irked at the fact that she was even bringing up the gunslinger right now. But what harm would it do? He was so close. So close to getting everything he wanted. But instead of pushing her away from him anymore, she was actually drawing closer to him. How could he deny her this one simple request?

(((((O))))))

Now he had turned his back on her. And why was he still not saying anything? Was he angry with her that she was bringing up Roland at a time when she and Walter were having an intimate moment? She felt her stomach knot. Had she been too forward with him this time? She really wished she knew what he was thinking right now.

"Walter, please. Say something."

Walter put his hands on his hips. She heard him sigh.

"Very well."

Her heart leapt. Was that defeat she had just heard in his voice? He was actually giving her something she wanted? But was there a catch? She took a deep breath.

"I will have some clothes brought to you."

Rachel exhaled. "Oh good. It'll be nice to have my clothes back."

"Not yours," Walter said in a testy voice. He finally turned to face her. "Something more light weight. And that doesn't have any connection to your...husband."

Rachel could have hugged him. All of the times she had ended up in the Tower, and now with this gown, she was actually enjoying being able to move about freely without a bunch of clothes hindering her movements. She grinned deviously.

"What?"

Rachel shrugged. "Nothing. I'm just...happy. I think. I know Roman loves me and I don't think I'll ever stop caring for him, but it's like...I feel free now." She nodded slowly. "Like I can be myself. Or any version of myself I want to be."

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Walter casually approached her.

Rachel tucked in her lip and nodded. "Yes it does. Thank you."

"Ahh don't thank me." He was right in front of her again. "The world has always been your oyster. You just needed a push to claim it."

Rachel sighed. "Pennywise. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. I do still miss my life sometimes, but now..." she sighed and shook her head. "I know we've had this conversation before. You've been telling me to let go of the idea of a normal life. I just didn't want to believe it."

"Denial can be tough."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "Yes it can. Which is why I'm not denying my feelings for you anymore."

Now it was Walter who raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

She shifted from one foot to the other. "Yeah. I still don't agree with you though. I never will. But that doesn't mean we have to fight. I hate arguing with you. I really do. I was starting to do it so much with Roman. It's aggravating. I just want to be around people who let me be who I am. That I don't have to be so...tense with."

Walter grinned. "And you're not tense with me?"

"Well you're unpredictable. And powerful. Plus you and I haven't had very much alone time. Believe me it took a while for me to get completely comfortable with Pennywise. Just the fact that he could just show up anywhere freaked me out for a while."

"You don't trust me."

It wasn't a question.

Rachel quirked an eyebrow. "Does a canary trust a cat? I want to trust you, Walter. Really I do."

"Turn around."

She squinted at him. "Uh?"

He touched her forearm. "You said you want to trust me. Turn around."

Rachel did as she was told.

"Close your eyes."

She closed them. She felt Walter's hands at her shoulders. He grabbed her robe and pulled it down. She let him. He threw her robe on the bed. Rachel's heart hammered in her chest.

"Relax. Breathe."

Rachel took a deep breath. She was so nervous she actually got a chill. What was he going to do? She felt his fingertips on her upper arms. He ran them down slowly. Then back up again. Just his fingertips. He did it several more times. Then he grasped her arms. Same thing. He drug his hands up and down, never losing contact with her skin.

Rachel took a shaky breath. To her surprise she did find herself starting to relax. She knew what he was doing now. She had heard of people using this technique with traumatized horses. It was supposed to be a calming method. When she felt him bunch her hair up and put it over her shoulder, she didn't even flinch. He started rubbing her shoulders. He dug his thumbs into the back of her neck, massaging it. She felt her shoulders droop. Neither of them spoke. It was just his hands on her, rubbing her, trying to relax her.

He removed his hands. "Turn around. Keep your eyes closed."

She obeyed. As soon as she was facing him, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her arms upwards. When she felt her knuckles graze his cheeks, she caught on to what he was doing. Now it was time for her to touch him. She flattened out her hands and gently touched his face, starting with his cheeks. He released her wrists. She touched his brow with both of her hands and slowly ran her fingers down his temples. Then she ran them along his cheeks. She grazed his lips with her right thumb. They weren't soft and full like Roman's but that was fine.

Roman. He would have never done anything like this for her. It had been sink or swim when it had come to getting her used to Pennywise. And as far as getting her to calm down, he had never

been that great at that either. Just a firm arm around her and a few comforting words. But this was different. Not really better, just different. This still didn't prove to Rachel that she could trust Walter's actions and he probably knew that, but still.

She ran her hands down the sides of his neck, caressing his throat with her thumbs. Then farther down still to the bareness of his chest that poked out of his vest. He was so firm. So solid. She remembered in the barn when he had helped her get over her almost heat stroke. How many times had he been there for her when her own husband hadn't been? She spread her hands apart on his chest and did something that she never thought she would ever do. Her eyes still closed, she got right up against him, and ever so gently, rested the side of her head against his chest. She could see about Roland later. And Pennywise. Could their worrying about her be any worse than her own family thinking she was dead?

She took a deep breath and let it out through her mouth. Walter put his arms around her. His chin came to rest on the top of her head. They had never been this close before. Not even when they had made out in her bedroom or even when they had made love, as he had been using Roman's body. This was a different kind of intimacy. Walter understood her. He always had. She realized that now. And he had always looked out for her even though his methods had been anything but honorable.

Her chest knotted up and her eyes opened. She had been worried about Pennywise joining up with Walter and what that would mean for her and Roland if he did. But now she had something quite possibly worse to worry about. Roland and Roman had always fought over her, about what was best for her, and in the end, for her love. But this was much, much worse. Walter was Roland's enemy, and he was an enemy of the Tower, which meant he was hers. And here she was in his arms, feeling like the rest of the universe could fall down around them and she wouldn't care. She didn't deserve Roland. Not even close. She didn't deserve his understanding, his support, or even his love. He deserved better than her, much better. She snuggled her face against Walter's chest. She had to choose. But did she? Did she have to choose either of them? And would it even matter if Walter won? Would she even care anymore?

And was she too far gone to turn back?

## 5. Chapter 5

Rachel's black boots clicked on the hard floor as she accompanied Walter down the hall. He still had never answered her question about where they were. 'I'll get you some clothes,' was all he had responded with a gentle touch to her arm. She nervously smoothed down her shirt. The fabric was soft and loosely fitted, like a cross between spandex and satin. The shirt was a deep cornflower blue. Her pants, which were a bit more fitted, were black. It took all she had not to pull up the neckline of her shirt, which plunged down right between her breasts. The neckline came right above her shoulders. And of course she wore her choker. Not that Walter had asked her to, she just thought it would be rude not to. Her hair she had decided to pull back into a loose braid.

When they were almost at the end of the hall, Walter stopped suddenly, causing her to almost bypass him. He grasped her arm lightly and stood right in front of her.

"Remember, don't talk to anyone unless asked a question."

"And why am I not doing that again?" Rachel pulled at the arms of her sleeves, which came down to her elbows.

"Because I would like to get this over as quickly as possible. I have other things to take care of."

Rachel waved her hand sideways. "Sooo I can ask questions? Just not right now?"

"Correct."

"Have people been asking about me?" She tilted her head, trying to catch a glimpse of the room beyond, but the hall made a sharp turn to the left.

"Getting anxious?"

"Well I mean," she waved towards down the hall with her right hand, "you're not telling me anything. It's kind of hard not to be at least

curious."

He reached out to touch her braid. "All in good time, my dear. Shall we?"

Walter gestured with his other hand in the direction Rachel had just pointed. She gave a nod and fell into step with him. She was trying not to visibly shake as a large, stone room came into view. Rachel took a deep breath...

And stepped into the Man in Black's world.

---

Jake Chambers was an expert on weird. For over a year now he had been having strange dreams. Dreams of a tower. And of a man dressed all in black. Dreams of children being abducted by some fake-skinned people and placed into some kind of machine. It was always during the dreams with the kids that the earthquakes happened. Jake understood weird all too well.

But to be climbing a mountain in the middle of the desert after passing through some kind of strange portal...

Now that was a different level of weird. There had been nothing for as far as Jake could see when he had first got there. Just sand, hard packed sand. But that was countless hours ago. And what appeared to be some mountains, way way in the distance. So he had made for that direction. He hadn't been afraid when he had gone through the portal. It was that or let the fake skinned people take him. He hoped his mom was okay. Would he ever see her again?

When he had seen the glint on the mountain, it had given him hope. Someone else was out there with him. Maybe he could find someone he could share his visions with, someone who would actually believe him. Maybe he would even run into the gunslinger. Or the girl with the golden eyes. He had been dreaming of her the last couple of months. She had been with a scary looking clown sometimes and at other times with a tall young man with light brown hair. Any kind of friendly life would be good.

So long as it wasn't the Man in Black.



---

The machines. Rachel had never seen anything like them before. They were like super high tech computers with equally high tech control panels attached to them. There were several people standing around the machines wearing maroon uniforms that looked like something from Star Trek. One guy was bent down looking at one of the monitors. He turned when he heard Walter approach.

"How is everything?" Walter asked, his voice all business now.

The guy stood. He had brown hair and appeared to be in his mid to late twenties.

"Well...there's been some activity with one of our portals in New York."

Rachel raised her eyebrows. Portals?

"New York? Why wasn't I informed of this?"

"Well we didn't..." the guy glanced over at Rachel then back again to Walter. "We didn't want to interrupt you, sir."

Walter glanced over at Rachel, then joined the young man at the computer looking contraption. "Which portal?"

The man pointed it out to him.

"Well, my dear," Walter addressed Rachel, "it looks like we're going to New York anyway."

Rachel frowned. "Anyway?" Walter was supposed to let her see what was going on with Roland and Pennywise.

Walter approached her. "Something has come up. I was planning to take you to New York anyway, so I can see about this first before we see about your...issue."

Rachel's stomach flip flopped. He was taking her back to her own realm. It wasn't Derry, but still. She couldn't help but smile.

"Well then, beam me up, Scotty."

---

Jake scrambled over the mountain incline. This had to be close to where he had seen the glint in the sun. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw several feet away the remains of a small camp fire. Jake ran up to it and fell to his knees next to it. A metal canteen sat next to it. That's what he must have seen. He opened it and sniffed it. He detected no strange odor, so he drank.

He heard a click behind him and his eyes grew wide. He whirled around, dropping the now empty canteen. He immediately recognized the man standing behind him, but that didn't lessen his fear of the gun pointed at him.

"Who are you?" Roland asked.

"It's you," Jake said in bewilderment.

The gunslinger didn't answer. So Jake took it that he should introduce himself. "I-I'm Jake. Jake Chambers. I had a dream about you."

Roland narrowed his eyes at Jake. He didn't respond.

"H-here." Jake reached down into his messenger bag and pulled out his drawing of Roland. He showed it to him. "You're a gunslinger, right?"

Roland didn't say anything. But he did holster his weapon. He strode around Jake as if he weren't even there.

"There are no gunslingers. Not anymore," Roland responded bitterly.

"But I saw-"

"Your dreams deceived you, boy. Showed you what you wanted to see."

Roland bent to pick up his canteen. He shook it and glared at Jake. Then he bent to pick up his bag. He slung it over his shoulder and walked past Jake to leave.

Jake stared after him. Why was the gunslinger leaving? Didn't the

fact that Jake had drawn him mean anything?

"I came a long way to find you. From another world," he called after Roland's retreating form.

"Have a nice trip back," Roland called back without stopping.

Jake followed him. "Wait. I mean, come on. I saw you. There was a battle. You were fighting the Man in Black."

It happened too fast for Jake to blink. One second, his feet were on solid rock, the next the gunslinger had him by the front of his shirt and had pulled Jake towards the edge of an extremely high cliff. The backs of his heels now hung off. Jake glanced behind himself and yelped in terror.

"You know the Man in Black? He sent you here didn't he? You're one of his tricks," Roland said in a growling voice.

"No! I don't know him!" Jake cried out in a whimpering voice.

"Where is he hiding? WHERE IS HE? WHERE IS HE KEEPING RACHEL?"

"I *don't* know! I just saw him like I saw you! Your name is Roland."

(((((O))))))

Some semblance of sanity slipped back into Roland's mind. What was he doing? This was a kid. And thanks to Roland's renewed obsession with destroying Walter and the constantly overwhelming worry about his beloved, he had almost killed him. He pulled the boy back from the edge. Roland turned his back on the boy and sat himself on a bolder. He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe. That moment still haunted him—Walter's hand on Rachel's head, her collapsing into his lap. And then Walter's declaration that he was done letting Roland and Roman play guardian to her. And that it was his turn. And then he had lifted her limp body like she was a rag doll.

And they had vanished.

Walter had her. Roland started to shake. His enemy had Rachel.

Finally. Had he finally gotten to sate his lust for her? And had he taken her violently or seduced her? Roland's hands gripped his knees as a hot white fury once again started to fill him. Forget his guns. He wanted his hands around Walter's neck. Wanted to watch the life drain from his eyes as he-

"Roland?"

Roland's eyes snapped open.

"Is everything alright?"

Roland swiped a hand across his face. He took a deep breath. Let it out through his parched mouth. "Do you have any other drawings with you?"

---

Rachel puked her guts out. Or at least what seemed like her guts since there was nothing else to come up. She went down on her knees on the sidewalk. Good thing there was grass right here to hide her mess.

"I take it you don't have your vial with you," came Walter's monotone voice.

Rachel didn't want to move. "No." She heard Walter sigh. "You're the one who wanted to take me with you," she told him heatedly. "It's not my fault my body reacted like this."

The portal crossing really hadn't been that bad. It had felt like what she had always imagined passing through a force field to feel like. But she had already been nauseated and the crossing hadn't helped.

"Do I need to bring you somewhere? To a convenience store or something?"

"For what?" Rachel stood.

Walter shrugged. "I don't know. It's not like I deal with pregnant women every day, you understand?"

Rachel glared at him. "Well this is my first pregnancy as well

*understand?* I don't know what to do for this."

She and Walter started walking again.

"Well you were a librarian weren't you? Didn't you have anything in those books of yours?" he countered.

"Well I'm sure we did. Not that I exactly needed to read them," she spat.

"So you've never been nauseated in your life at all?"

"Well of course I-" Rachel hadn't thought of that. She used to love to suck on peppermints when she would get sick. Drinking something carbonated like Coke or Sprite would help also.

"Something to drink would help. Or if I could find something to suck on, like a peppermint."

A wave of lust hit her and she almost came to a halt. Where had that come from? She snuck a glance over at Walter, but he still stared straight ahead. Ok. What had she said? It couldn't have been the part about drinking something. So what else would...

Her mouth fell open and she slowed to a stop. Was he serious? One little comment that had nothing to do with sex and that's what his mind went to?

He turned to look at her. "What?"

"Nothing. I was just...wondering what you were thinking about."

"The fact that I would love to keep moving," he said nonchalantly.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Right," she said dubiously.

"What did you think I was thinking about?" Walter's grin spoke volumes.

Okay. She would play the game. It's not like it was going to make her nausea go away anyway. "I don't know. You tell me."

Walter's grin widened. "Oh, baby girl." He gave a shake of his head. "You don't wanna know."

He gestured with his head for her to follow. They started walking again. So she was right. He was thinking about her giving him head. She felt a blush creep into her cheeks.

"So you would want me to do that? Whatever you're thinking about right now?"

"Sweetheart, if I knew it wouldn't make you throw up again, I would ask you to get on your knees right now."

"Oh." Her face was flaming now. She had never even thought about going down on a guy before. Not even to Roman. And the idea of doing it to Walter right here on a sidewalk in New York... Her stomach gave a lurch. "You wouldn't make me..."

Now it was Walter's turn to stop. His face was now a mask of seriousness. "You think I would do that to you? Get you to perform oral sex on me?"

Rachel shifted from one foot to another. "No. I mean, not really. I would hope not."

"I've done some things to you. Things that I will regret for the rest of our relationship. But I'm not a monster, Rachel. Or at least not your monster. You know my feelings for you run deeper than that."

"I know. But I've seen how you can..."

Rachel saw movement out of the corner of her eye. A jogger. A female one. Rachel hadn't really paid much attention to her surroundings since getting out of the portal, but now... The woman was wearing super tight and super skimpy jogging wear. But it wasn't just that that caught her attention. It was the device that at her hip that was attached to her headphones. It wasn't a Walkman, that was for sure. Rachel glanced around some more. She saw more people walking around carrying similar devices. And the clothes. Even the vehicles looked different. Rachel had always heard that going to New York City was like going to another country. But this was different. It

was like they had leapfrogged through time.

"Walter..." She whispered his name.

It barely even registered when she felt his hand on her shoulder.

"What is it, my love?"

"What year is this?"

"2017."

---

Roland rifled through the boy's drawings. There was one of the Tower. One of just Walter. He stopped at the next one. Rachel and Roman. Apparently the boy had seen them too. Rachel was facing Roman. She wore a dress with way too thin straps. The look on her face was one of love and adoration. Roland wanted to tear the page to pieces. If he never saw the demonic clown again, it would be too soon.

"This girl? You have seen her before?" Roland asked Jake.

"Yeah. Several times. Sometimes she's with this guy and others with a clown. A freaky clown."

Roland grunted. "Freaky is one way to put it."

"You know him?" Jake asked in astonishment.

"Yes. His name is Pennywise. If you ever see him, stay away. He's not someone you want to mess with."

"What about her? The girl? She seems nice enough."

Roland sighed. Best to stay away from that topic. "What about Walter? Do you have any others of him?" He handed the drawings back to Jake.

"Walter? The Man in Black?"

"Yes."

Jake dug around in his bag and pulled out another picture. This one had Walter and some kind of strange building in the background. Roland remembered not too long ago of Rachel mentioning a pyramid. A topless pyramid. She had seen it in a dream. Apparently so had Jake. Roland sat down on his rock again. He needed to think.

"So what is he?" Jake inquired.

"He's a sorcerer." Roland pointed at the drawing. "So in all your visions, Walter is here?"

"Yeah."

*Must be where he's keeping Rachel.*

Roland needed to find her. And Walter. And he knew exactly where to go to ask. He folded up the drawing and tucked it inside his coat.

"Yeah. Keep it," he heard Jake say.

Roland went to the cliff and stared off at the forest beyond. Then off into the horizon. "I'm coming for you," he told Rachel even though he knew she couldn't hear him. Then to Jake, he said, "There is a village run by seers. I will take you there. One of them will be able to read your visions."

Jake nodded. "Okay. Cool deal."

"Let's go then. We don't have much time." Roland went past Jake.

"There's another thing."

Roland turned.

"The girl. Do you know who she is?"

Roland sighed. "Yes."

"I saw her in the Tower. And then again near this pyramid building. But there was something strange about her."

Roland furrowed his brow. "Like what?"



"Both times I saw her, she had this dark grayish aura about her. Like some kind of weird floating fire. But there was something else too.

Roland held his breath. He didn't like where Jake was going with this.

"She had wings. Dark wings. It was like she was this dark...angel. Or a human phoenix or something."

Wings. Rachel had mentioned something about wings before. Was it a metaphor for something. Or was she going to actually transform into something else due to new Guardian status.

Either way, Roland didn't like this. Not only did it mean that she was possibly going to become something else entirely, but Rachel did have Walter's powers inside of her. Roland was sure of it. She just hadn't accessed them yet. Was Walter helping her with that right now? Was he finally going to pull her into his darkness? Angels weren't the only women with wings. Or whatever a phoenix was. For some reason Pennywise's leering face popped into Roland's mind. Roland had to get to Rachel fast. Before Walter succeeded in doing what Pennywise had thankfully failed to do.

Not only angels had wings. And if Walter ended up completely corrupting Rachel to the point of no return, Roland would have to end the only precious thing in his life.

He would have to kill Rachel.

## 6. Chapter 6

"So you can use these cell phones to look up anything? *Anything?*" Rachel followed Walter like a little puppy dog.

"Yes, sweetness. Anything your pretty little heart desires."

Walter felt like he had a child with him. Now that she had gotten over her initial shock about jumping almost thirty years into the future, Rachel had questions about *everything*. He had found it endearing at first, but now he was ready to get back to business. When he came upon the house that held the portal, he was none too relieved. Time to figure out what was going on.

(((((O))))))

Rachel knew that she had to be annoying Walter with her thousands of questions, but she couldn't help it. Now that her initial shock had worn off, she was actually excited. And curious. *Very* curious. Everything she saw fascinated her. From the clothes to the cars. And when Walter started explaining to her what those cell phone things were and how they worked, she began to get excited about the future. Maybe she could even end up living in this new time period. Of course it would be hard for her to get a job or a house with not even an i.d. or any money to her name whatsoever. But then again, being with someone who could do time and realm travel did have its perks.

They arrived at a two story tan house with a wrought iron fence in front of it. The narrow, tall windows on the bottom floor were boarded up and the grass was severely overgrown. Rachel couldn't help but be reminded of a house that she had just all too recently spent a lot of time at that was in a very similar condition.

Sure enough, Walter went through the gate. Rachel started to follow, but her legs turned to jello before she could even get to the steps. She could still see the inside of the Neibolt house so clearly. Could see herself sitting on the couch, washing off all her cuts and scrapes while Pennywise tenderly licked the blood off her legs. She felt like a zombie as Walter opened the door to this new house. A wave of

sadness and homesickness came over her. Walter went inside, but she didn't follow. She couldn't. She stopped at the steps and lowered herself onto the bottom one. How she longed to feel Pennywise's arms around her. Where was he now? Did she even care anymore?

No. She finally realized she didn't. It was the past she mourned. The past of a romance so deep, but had been built on a foundation so rotten and decayed that it had crumbled under the slightest hint of pressure. Pennywise had been the first real love of her young life. And if Walter destroyed the Tower then she would never have a chance to know another. She had to talk him out of it.

She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the warm sunshine streaming down on her. But all she could see was Derry: Bill and his friends riding their bikes, her and Roman splashing around at the Barrens. Her chest tightened and she wrapped her arms around her midsection. She wouldn't let herself cry. Yet somehow a stray tear leaked out.

She heard footsteps behind her and hastily wiped the tear away. Walter sat on the steps behind her, one of his long, black clad legs appearing next to her. She leaned her elbow on it and sighed.

"I had a normal life, Walter. I had a job. I had a house. I could have come to New York if I wanted to try to become a Broadway actress or tried to get more into drawing. Why is all of this happening to me?"

"They are all sheep, Rachel. You were a sheep. You deserve more than that."

She didn't answer. Because she didn't know what to say.

"Do you still like fairytales?"

Rachel sighed. "I used to. Until I got sucked into one. Not as pretty to live as they are to read, I can assure you."

He placed his hand on the back of her neck and started massaging it. She was starting to find his little hand to skin contact moments with her comforting.

"And if someone came up to you right now and handed you a book

that could be considered a...fairytale, you wouldn't be curious to know what was inside? Wouldn't be drawn to its pages?"

"What are you saying?" Rachel lifted herself and turned, sitting to face him.

"I'm saying you're the kind of woman who lets herself fall for a creature that she knows nothing about because deep down, she has more faith in the supernatural than the mundane and normal. Who when she is in the desert looks up at the stars at night before she goes to sleep and wonders what the hell is out there and if she can ever be a part of it." Walter leaned in towards her. "You *belong* among those stars, Rachel. Not down here." He laid his hand on her throat and fingered the bejeweled star at her neck. "You *belong* with me."

It was at that moment that Rachel realized something. When she and Walter left Mid-World, she had left everything in Mid-World, including all thought or worry of Roland. When she had been in Mid-World, she could never go too long without thinking about Walter. First it had been just fearing that he would return. Then it had turned to looking forward to his visits, and then in her last days in the desert with Roland, she had really thought about Walter. In fact, she had missed him.

She didn't miss Roland now as she sat between Walter's legs on the steps of this abandoned house. In fact, this was the closest to feeling at home that she had felt since she left Derry. No she would see Roland again one day. She was sure of it. Maybe even one day soon. But she was here. She was with Walter. And deep down, she finally admitted to herself...

She was exactly where she had wanted to be.

Walter's right hand was resting on his knee. She tentatively reached out to cover it with her own.

"I don't know about belonging with just yet, but I have to be honest. We do make a pretty kick ass couple when we're not squabbling at each other's throats."

"You know it."

She met Walter's gaze and gave him a grin. "Just sitting here with you feels right. Like we're just too normal people out on the town, going out on a date."

"We're *not* normal, sweetheart. But if you want to consider this a date, than that sure as hell is fine with me."

"I'm sure it would be," she said with a laugh.

She let out a loud sigh. Walter's face beamed down in the sunshine, making his skin seem more bronze. Rachel got an absurd idea.

"Let's just sit here and stare at each other all day. That would be funny, huh?" She giggled.

A thoughtful look came over Walter's face. "Actually I might like that. That way you could get another heat stroke and I can whisk you away to my bedchamber again."

Rachel let out a loud gasp. "Walter!" She slapped him on the arm. "How dare you! Taking advantage of me like that," she said in a feigned angry voice.

Walter spread his arms as Rachel stood. She turned her back to him and crossed her arms, though she secretly had a grin on her face.

"And what, you think I would do anything to you while you were sleeping?" His voice was loud. "What makes you think I would do that?"

"History!"

"Alright fine then! Be like that! I'll just go through the portal and leave your scrawny little ass here while I go back to Mid-World! See how you feel about that!"

Rachel whipped around, her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You *wouldn't* dare."

Walter was on his feet now. "Oh ho. You just watch." He shook a finger at her, then went inside.

Rachel shook her head. "My ass is not scrawny!" she hollered at him.

She trudged up the steps after Walter and stopped short when she stepped inside. Rachel had more than once over the years heard Richie Tozier refer to the Neibolt house as a crackhead house. She didn't want to know what kind of people hung out in this one. There were actual boards missing out of the walls and lying haphazardly on the floors. There was no furniture, but of course everything was covered in dust. It made the Neibolt house look like a Beverly Hills mansion. Walter went into the next room, and she followed. The feel of the house reminded her just enough of Neibolt that she kept expecting Pennywise to jump out. The thought terrified her somehow. She hadn't seen Roman since that day that Walter took her from the desert. And then she still didn't know how many days ago that had been. She had never asked. Couldn't have been more than two though. There was no way she had slept that long. She and Walter turned a corner and red writing on the wall opposite of them caught her attention. Walter moved aside and when she saw what it said, it made her blood run cold.

*All hail the Crimson King.*

And under it was the red swirly eye. The Crimson King's symbol. She had seen it once before. Right before the Battle of Tull.

Right before she officially became Walter's enemy.

Rachel swallowed. She could feel a cough wanting to rise up in her throat. What was it with her and dust all of a sudden? It was like she'd become allergic to it.

Sure enough, the coughing started. The writing was in a short hallway and she could see into the room beyond. Walter went there next. Rachel rounded the corner and stopped short, her mouth gaping open. It was like the floor had teeth. In the middle of the room, a pile of jagged boards either lay on the floor or stuck out of it haphazardly.

"I wonder what happened here," she told Walter.

"House demon," he said as if that would explain everything. "Someone has destroyed it." He knelt next to the pile.

Rachel gaped at him. "*House* demon?" And someone had destroyed it. What in the hell was a house demon? And who would have the kind of powers needed to defeat it? Rachel put her arm over her mouth as she caught another mild coughing fit. As she did so, she noticed the wall behind Walter. It looked just like one that she had seen in the place where Walter had been keeping her at in the room with the futuristic computer looking devices. Plus she and Walter had just passed through one. Portal.

"Walter."

He glanced at her and she pointed behind him.

"Is that a portal?" she asked just to verify.

"That it is. You're learning." He stood.

Rachel noticed something else to the right of him. It looked like some kind of keypad with a small black screen above it. She coughed again.

"I don't like that cough. The last time you did that was in the stable at the waystation," Walter pointed out.

"I don't know what, *cough*, my deal is. *Cough cough*. It's like I'm allergic to dust all of a sudden."

"We won't be long."

Walter seemed to study the keypad. Rachel sucked a breath as another coughing spell hit her, this one more intense than the last. She coughed so hard, her throat actually hurt. And it wouldn't stop either. She couldn't breathe anymore. She had to get out of there. She didn't even tell Walter. He would find her when he was done. By the time she was outside, she was almost gagging. She bypassed the steps and stopped in the middle of the small path that led to the house. She took a deep breath, coughing some more. She breathed in again. Slowly her fit subsided. Something was definitely not right with her. It was like she had developed asthma all of a sudden.

"Maturin, what's wrong with me?" She closed her eyes. "Please talk to me. I need guidance so badly."

She kept focusing on her breathing, trying to calm her center.

*"You will not be able to change him, child."*

Her eyes popped open. "Maturin," she breathed. She glanced around frantically.

*"Walter is a being of darkness. He seeks for nothing more to destroy all life as we know it."*

She lifted her face heavenward. "But I have to try. You know I do. For a lot of reasons. He's starting to care about me. And our baby. I know it."

*"Perhaps. But he will never know the pureness of true love. Not as you do."*

She glanced behind her. Walter hadn't come out the house yet, but she still lowered her voice, to be on the safe side. "But what about my condition? Why do I keep coughing all of a sudden?"

*"Your very essence is changing, child. The magic of the Tower is inside you, but so is Walter's. Be wary, as one of these magics repels the other. If you are not careful, either one of them can consume you. But Walter's would be the worse."*

Rachel's stomach dropped and her face fell. "Oh. Well that's...nice to know. And what about Roland?"

*"Do not ask Walter about him again. You will see him soon enough. Be brave. And remember what you stand for, Rachel. Remember."*

"Well isn't this just dandy?" Rachel grumbled to herself. Shaking her head, she turned just in time to see Walter exit the house.

"Find what you wanted?" she called.

"Getting close." He joined her in the yard.

Rachel could hear a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Feeling alright?"



She put a hand on her chest. "My chest hurts and I'm very hungry. Other than that, fine."

"I have one more stop to make." He draped his arm across her shoulder to lead her along. "If we can find you something quick along the way, you can eat first."

"Yay," she said softly.

Twenty minutes later, Rachel sat on a bench eating a hot dog with relish. Walter stood nearby. She could tell by his stance that he was getting anxious. He had allowed her a short break to eat and rest, but then he had said they would have to move on soon after.

"I'm sorry if I can't eat faster. I don't want to choke."

"Take your time." He didn't look at her when he said that.

She didn't know why she felt guilty. Walter had more or less stolen this hot dog for her. When the vendor had told them their price, Walter said they had already paid. The vendor had smiled at him and apologized. Rachel had felt bad for the man. But it had made her think of something. Walter had just demonstrated another of his powers to her that she didn't know he possessed. Persuasion. Would she be able to do that one day? Would her son? There was also something else she wondered as well.

"Why have you never used your persuasion on me?"

"Because I don't want to. I would rather you learn to listen to me on your own."

Still not looking at her.

"Walter, come sit. You're starting to make *me* anxious."

He came and sat next to her.

"I won't be much longer. I promise."

Walter leaned forward and laced his fingers together. "Like I said. Take your time. You need to finish getting your strength back."

She stopped chewing at that comment. Her chest tightened. *He really does care for me.* Her thoughts went back to Maturin's words. She would not be able to change him. But she had to try. For the sake of the universe. And for her children. Then maybe, just maybe, she and Walter could try to have some kind of relationship if that's what they both decided they wanted.

They made their way farther into Brooklyn. Rachel could actually see the bridge off in the distance. Finally Walter stopped.

"This is as far as you can go, Rachel."

She gawked at him. "What? Why? What do you-"

"I can't let you see where we're going. Once we're inside, you'll be fine."

"So uh..." she shifted her stance. "What do you want me to do?"

"You have two options." Walter's voice was all business now. "Either I can temporarily cloud your vision to where you can't see and I can carry you the rest of the way, or I can just let you go in and wipe your memory of how we got there."

"You're serious?" She glared at him. "You don't trust me, but you expect me to trust you?"

"I don't trust Roland Deschain," he spat.

Rachel shook her head. "Jesus Christ." She let out a heavy sigh. "How much farther?"

"Not far."

"Well you're not gonna mess with my memory, that's for damn sure," she said testily.

"Alright. Blindfolded it is."

He lifted his hand to Rachel's face, but she jerked her head back. "You're going to blind me?"

"I'm going to blindfold you, my love. With magic. It will not affect your eyes at all."

Rachel tucked in her lips. "Alright. But you owe me." She pointed her finger at him. "One small favor."

"I would give you the universe if you asked for it."

Rachel's breath caught in her throat. *Holy fucking shit. He's dead serious about us.*

"Please don't hurt me, Walter."

"It's not gonna hurt. Just close your eyes."

Rachel obeyed.

"Now open them again."

Rachel's eyes flew open. She yelped. It was like she was looking at a fog. A thick grey covered her eyes. "Oh my..." She started shuffling her feet. She blinked but the fog was still there. "Walter..."

"No, no. Don't panic." She felt his hand on the side of her temple. "It's not real, baby girl. Just an illusion. Close your eyes if it helps."

Rachel took a shaky breath. She closed them. "P-please let's get this over with." Rachel started to shake. She just wanted to go home. Or at least whatever his version of home was.

Walter's lips grazed her forehead. He stayed there, not moving.

"You have got to trust me at least somewhat," he whispered against her brow. "Without trust, there is nothing. You know that. I am *not* Pennywise. I will not love you and leave you."

Rachel took a deep breath. She felt herself start to relax. "Then you would be a pretty shitty boyfriend if you did that."

"Yes I would." He rubbed her back. "Now let's get this day over with so that I can bring you back. And then if you want I will help you to relax. Any way you want. Just name it, baby girl."

Rachel let out a gruff laugh. "You're a real smooth talker, you know that?"

"Just getting started, my love." Walter put his arms around her tighter. "Just getting started."

## 7. Chapter 7

Rachel had heard of the phrase blind trust. But to have to do it literally... Her stomach was in knots the whole time Walter carried her. She knew that he had done it before while she was unconscious, so it shouldn't have been that bad. But to have her sight temporarily revoked was chafing at her nerve bad. Plus the fact that she had no idea what she was about to be walking in to wasn't helping. She decided to lighten the moment.

"So uh...do you have any family? Any parents? Siblings?"

Walter chuckled. "You're adorable sometimes."

She could practically hear him smiling.

"Why 'cause I asked you about your family? You know stuff about me. Isn't it only fair?"

Walter's grip on her tightened. *Touchy subject?* she wondered.

"My father is Maerlyn."

"Wait. *The* Merlin. As in King Arthur's Merlin?"

"Yes, ma'am. Or as the rest of the universe calls him: Arthur Eld. Though the story is quite different than the one you've learned."

"Will you...tell it to me one day?"

Walter's steps faltered for just an instant.

(((O)))

Walter almost stumbled. Almost. He stared down at the girl in his arms. She wanted to know about his family. Boy wouldn't that make a pretty bedtime story for her? She would probably run from him kicking and screaming.

And she wanted him to tell her about it one day. She was actually talking about the future. A future with him? Walter's breathing

quicken. Could this actually be happening? He had the power. And the best part was, so did she. So close.

"One day."

When they got to their destination, he set Rachel down. He opened the door and told her to step forward. So she did.

"Open your eyes."

(((((O))))))

Rachel opened her eyes. The grey fog was gone. They had entered a building. She heard loud sounds, like people talking and clambering around. Walter put his hand on the back of her neck as he went past her. She followed. A short line of people stood to their left and two men to their right. As Walter walked past them, they stopped talking and bowed their heads. Several of them were dressed like they were going to a club. A couple wore hoodies. The women wore dark makeup. They reminded Rachel of an underground crime ring. She felt small all of a sudden. Vulnerable. Right beyond the room widened. A small group of people stood before them, some of them standing, some of them sitting. They were wearing the same kind of clothing as the group they had just walked past. A few of them held goblets. One of them was a woman wearing what Rachel would describe as sultry aristocratic garb. They all turned when she and Walter approached. Amongst them was a short man with a bald head. When he turned, Rachel squinted her eyes at him. Several red dots adorned his face. She wondered what that was about.

He bowed at Walter. "Sire. We were not expecting you for some time now."

Rachel stepped forward to stand besides Walter and the man's eyes grew wide when he noticed her.

He inclined his head at her. "My lady."

My lady? What had Walter been telling his followers about the two of them? And how did the man know right away who she was? Did Walter never go anywhere with anyone? Especially women?

"To what do we owe this honor?"

"One of your portals here in New York has been activated."

The man raised an eyebrow at Walter. "Forgive me, sire. We were not aware. Did you find who it was?"

"Already on it." Walter held up something. It looked like a sliver of clear glass. The tip was red. He must have found it at the abandoned mansion. "Would you mind uh..." he held the glass out to the bald man, "doing your thing?"

Rachel watched in rapt fascination as the bald man took the glass and put the red end in his mouth. He sucked in a loud breath.

"The blood belongs to a boy. About fifteen or sixteen years of age." A grin lit up his red dotted face. "His shine is pure."

"He killed a house demon."

The bald man raised an eyebrow and studied the glass. "A boy with a shine strong enough to kill a demon?" he mused. "Sounds like he's definitely worth looking into."

"But if he went through the portal..."

Walter and the bald man both turned their attention to Rachel.

"He could be anywhere in Mid-World," Rachel continued. "How are we supposed to find him?"

Now it was Walter's turn to raise an eyebrow at Rachel.

"Sayre," the woman sitting with the goblet spoke up, "didn't two-skins have trouble with a boy yesterday?"

---

On the way to Walter's hideout, Rachel had sat perfectly still in his arms. Now it took all she had not to jump out of them. She had so many questions. She and Walter didn't speak for a while. Finally she started hearing fast moving traffic. She hadn't heard that on the way to the hideout. He must be taking her back a different way. Finally

she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Walter, what's a shine?"

"It's what we call psychic powers. You have it, but it's just a trace."

"Who was that man with the dots on his face? And why did he call me 'my lady'? What have you been telling them about me?"

"Only the truth. That you would one day end up in my arms. And here we are."

Rachel clamped down on Walter's shoulder. Was that all he thought of her as? Something to be conquered? She heard cars zooming by her now, but it sounded like they were underneath her. Where in the hell were they? Suddenly, she didn't want to be around people anymore. She just wanted to face the self-centered, egomaniac who held her.

"So I'm still just another goddamn conquest for you," she muttered.  
"Hooray for fucking me."

She gasped as Walter almost threw her out of his arms. She landed in a crouch. Her eyes flew open. She wanted to scream at the stupid fog. She stepped forward, but Walter's arms came around her.

"Conquest? You think you're just a fucking conquest, Rachel?"

Her eyes cleared in a flash and she almost did scream. She had almost walked into a railing.

A railing on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Vehicles zoomed underneath her. Rachel didn't exactly have a problem with heights, the sudden shock caused a wave of dizziness to come over her. She fought against Walter's grasp.

"Is that all you think I think of you as?"

"Let me go!"

He turned her sideways and released her. She pushed herself away



from him and turned to face him.

"Well apparently that's all you talk about people like I am," she hollered.

"When I *first* met you," he countered.

She put her hand over her mouth. Images started flooding her mind of all the times Walter had tried to pursue her in Tull. A cyclist rode by her and she jumped.

"Do I treat you like a conquest, Rachel?"

She swallowed.

"Do I?"

She jumped again at the sharpness in his voice. She shook her head.

He slowly advanced on her.

"If you were just a *conquest*, would I have brought you some place quiet and comfortable to rest until you woke up?"

Rachel wrapped her arms around her midsection. She couldn't meet Walter's gaze.

"If you were just a conquest, would I have stopped this morning when you asked me to?" He grabbed her arms and turned her to face him. "Would I have gotten you food this afternoon or would I have just taken you in some alley to fuck you raw against some wall?"

Rachel tried to pull her arms out of his grasp and he released her. Finally she did meet his gaze.

"You don't know how stressful this day has been for me." She raised her voice to make damn sure he heard her every word. "I finally get to come back to my own world, but in another *time period*? I don't know what's happened to my family. I don't even know if my baby brother made it out of Pennywise's lair or not or if he's just a skeleton lying there. And now I find out that you're about to go after some kid yourself. I mean, are you planning to hurt him? Hell, Walter, I don't

know. I don't know a goddamn thing about you." She spread her arms. "I told you earlier that I felt like we were going on a date and what do you do? You remind me yet *again* that my life is never going to be the same. Like I actually *need* reminding of that." She turned away from him and placed her hands on the wide steel railing, staring out at the wide river that ran underneath them. "I am so unbelievably tired of wondering what's going to happen next with you."

She crossed her arms on the railing and leaned on them. The wind buffeted her and for a moment she wanted so badly to be in the Tower that it was almost a physical pain in her chest. She missed Eleanor terribly. Her unborn daughter's death had left a wound in her soul that still cut like a knife every time she thought about it too hard.

And then another thought came to her that twisted the knife. What if Walter would decide to leave to Tower in peace? And what if she could bring him up there somehow? What would he think of Eleanor? She could so picture the two of them together.

She thought of the child now growing inside her. What kind of environment would she be bringing him into? Would she be raising him with Walter or with someone totally different?

She felt Walter's arms on her shoulders and automatically leaned back against him. He put his arms around her and rested his cheek against her temple. As she closed her eyes, she heard him whisper two words so softly the wind took them away as they left his lips.

"I'm sorry."

---

Walter closed the door softly. Rachel glanced around, relieved to finally be back in Walter's room.

"I'll have someone bring dinner to you shortly. Feel free to help yourself to the books. In fact, I actually want you to. I believe there are some things in there you may find useful, but I highly suggest you don't try anything when I'm not around."

Rachel couldn't help but smile. They were books on magic. And Walter wanted to teach her.

"Are there any that talk about any of your abilities?"

Her eyes met Walter's.

"Most of them."

His eyes quickly scanned her face and she glanced away. She tucked in her bottom lip.

"I have to return to New York."

Of course. He still needed to see about the boy that the man Sayre had told him about. She had asked no more questions about their little spat on the bridge.

"Will you uh...come back when you're done? To come meet me?" She laced her hands in front of her and in just a few strides, closed the distance between her and Walter. Their eyes met again. This time, she didn't look away.

"If that's what you want." His voice was shockingly soft.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. It was a sigh of contentment. What reason did she have to be afraid of him anymore? If anything she was becoming afraid to be without him.

"I do." She smiled and nodded. "I really do."

---

Walter scowled at the two two-skins that sat across the table from him at a restaurant, a man and a woman. He still couldn't believe the boy had gotten away from them. It was a mistake they would soon regret.

"I must say, it is an honor to meet you," the woman crooned. She was older, in her mid-fifties. "When we heard you-"

"What happened?" Walter asked.

"We went to his house. He was actually going to come with us, but when he saw us, it's like he knew something was up," said the man.

"It was like he knew what we were," the woman added.

"Name. Address."

The woman reached into her purse and pulled out a sheet of paper. She handed it to Walter. His eyes scanned it. What he saw staring up at him was the next best thing to if she would have handed him something saying how to enter the Tower.

Walter grinned. "Jake. Chambers."

He said the name like a litany. Like a prayer. He tucked the paper inside his coat.

"Now kill," he gave his pathetic two-skins one last idle glance, "each other."

The man and the woman started brutally hitting each other. They both fell out of their chairs. Walter heard someone cry out. He casually stood.

"Calm down. Enjoy the show," he told the crowd of people standing before him, waiting to order their food. They all turned as one to watch the two-skins fighting, as though some invisible force had made them. Which it had. At the same time, the crowd parted to let Walter pass. He sauntered through them as though he were king of all.

"You ain't seen nothing yet."

---

Walter heard the footsteps up the stairs. He didn't even bat an eyelash when the boy's parents stepped into the kitchen and froze like a couple of statues.

"I hope you don't mind me making myself at home." She smiled up at them. "Where I come from, we don't have chicken."

"Who the hell are you?" the boy's pathetic excuse of a stepfather

demanded.

Walter wacked at the chicken breast that he had just placed on the counter.

"Oh you know who I am, Lon. You called me. Not with the phone of course, but with every desire to get rid of your brat stepson, all so that Mommy here," he gestured at Jake's mother with the cleaver, "will love you best."

*Whack.*

Lon strode towards Walter. "Who the hell do you think-"

"Lon...It's the man from Jake's drawings." Walter heard Laurie whisper.

Walter turned, his interest now peaked. "Drawings?"

He took off the chef's apron he had been wearing and set it on the counter. He waved his hand at Lon. "Stop breathing."

Lon fell to the floor, dead.

Laurie's horrified gaze fell to her husband, a cry escaping her throat.

Walter held his hands up. "Quiet." She shut up. He got in her face. "Drawings." He said it calmly, but she still obeyed.

Laurie led him to Jake's bedroom. She turned on the light. Walter put his hand on her shoulder. "Show me."

Images like ghosts flickered to life: Jake in his room, Jake and his mom in his room, Jake putting drawings on the wall above his desk. Walter watched all of this, his hands on his hips. There were easily a couple of dozen drawings. All of them either of the Tower or of Walter.

"Well it looks like I've got myself a stalker."

Suddenly an image of Jake popped up at the desk. He was drawing Roland. So the boy had seen the gunslinger as well. Walter glanced

up at the wall again. He turned to leave, but something stopped him. The drawings weren't done popping up yet.

Her. They were all images of her. His future queen. One of them was with her and Roman. And another...

Walter bent forward to study the image closer. And as he did, he felt his blood run cold.

Rachel was surrounded by what appeared to be stone, in some kind of doorway. Her back was to him, but her head was turned. It was definitely her. Walter knew those eyes and that hair anywhere. Rachel had wings and was holding a sword.

It had been eons since Walter had seen a valkyrie, a winged woman who dealt out judgement on whose souls could be ferried to the afterlife on the field of battle. Basically they were a lower class of angels.

Was this what Rachel had been in her previous life, or what she was going to become? Either way, this didn't sit well with Walter at all. He turned back to Jake's mother.

"This son of yours is quite special isn't he? And you wanted to send him to the asylum." He shook his head.

He could see the fear in Laurie's eyes as he approached her. Walter would never deny his own son. But would he have to deny his son's mother? The woman he had fallen so deeply in love with.

He got in Laurie's face.

"Shame...on you."

---

Not a trace of smoke covered Walter as he slipped without a sound into his bedroom. It had been a dirty business killing Jake Chamber's mother, but it wasn't like she hadn't deserved it. What kind of woman treated her son that had that phenomenal of a gift like he was a head case?

He heard the soft, even breathing of his woman coming from their

bed. Their bed. He could get used to that. He magicked himself a pair of loose-fitting pajamas (black of course) and climbed into bed with her under the sheets. He would have climbed in naked, but considering their conversation they had had later that day on the bridge, he didn't want to unnerve her. Did she really just see herself as an object of Walter's unbridled sexual desires? After all he had done for her? He would have to do something about that? Unless it was as she had said, she had just been really stressed when she had said that. She had been stressed at that moment. And sad. He had felt that. And he hated it. Would she hate him after he brought the Tower down? Or would he be able to make her see that in the end it didn't matter anyway?

He sidled up against her and slid his arm around her. She moaned softly, then readjusted her position. She settled back down with a sigh.

He nuzzled his nose against her ear.

"Sleep tight, baby girl. I'm not going anywhere," he said softly. "And you're not either." He settled his face in her hair, breathed in her scent. "My future queen. My future wife...My life."

## 8. Chapter 8

Walter opened the door to his bedroom. He quietly set the platter of food on his desk. She was still sleeping. She had been sleeping a lot since she had lost Pennywise's spawn, he'd noticed. He hated to wake her, if her body was still trying to catch up on getting rest, but he decided to anyway. Now that she was with him, things were going to be totally different. Regular, healthy meals, hot baths, rest. As little stress as possible.

He sat on the bed next to her. She was lying on her side, facing him. He gently shook her shoulder.

"Time to wake up, pussy cat," he said softly. He shook her a little more. "Rachel," he called a little louder.

She didn't move. He pushed her hair aside, and rubbed along her jawline. She groaned and moved a bit, but then settled back down.

"Rachel, your food's going to get cold."

He shook her some more. She didn't respond at all. He gave her a slight push and she fell over onto her back, her hair spilling off to the side. He leaned over her and grabbed her face with both hands. Something wasn't right. He tried to probe into her mind. All he got was haze with just a few scattered thoughts. She was in a deep slumber. Deeper than any human should have been.

A feeling of coldness seeped into Walter's chest. No. He had cleansed all of Pennywise from her. Rachel must have lost more of her humanity than Walter realized. How long had the demon clown been awake for? And how much longer did that mean she had? Should Walter wake her? Would it hurt her?

"Fuck!"

He hated this. Hated how out of his control it was. He cradled her head in his hand, lifting it. He had to wake her. And he would have to delve deep to do it. He bowed his head and closed his eyes. Right away, memories assailed him: Rachel's family, her job, the theatre



group she was a part of. He saw her with Pennywise, talking, fucking. Normally Walter would have clung to those images if only out of pure lust and jealousy, but today he just pushed them aside. Then something stopped him short.

It was a little girl. Her hair was a long, rusty red with just a hint of curl. She must have been about five years old. Her skin was so pale, it was almost translucent and her eyes were a golden yellow.

Rachel's miscarried child. It had to be. Rachel had seen her. But how? And how had Walter never felt or seen the girl in her mind before? Walter tried to dig in deeper to get a closer look around the child, but felt a pain in his head as he did so. Rachel started moaning. Finally some kind of response. Walter searched a little more. There. He mentally pulled on Rachel's consciousness and when he heard a gasp, he opened his eyes. Rachel was awake. Her eyes were hooded and she moaned softly. Walter removed his hand.

"Wha's going on?" Her voice was groggy, but she was definitely awake.

Walter breathed a sigh of relief. "Nothing, sweetheart. I just wanted to tell you your breakfast is ready."

Rachel gave him a sleepy smile. "Good. I'm sohungry," she slurred.

She tried to sit up, but fell back again. "I can't wake up this morning."

Walter gave a nod. "You were sleeping hard. But don't rush yourself." He kept his voice calm.

Slept hard? She just had soon been in a coma.

"I've slept that hard before A few times." She pulled the covers up to under her chin. Her voice was more alert now. "But usually it was because I was unconscious. But this..." She shook her head. "It was different."

"Different how?" Walter rubbed the sheets over her chest.

"I didn't even dream at all. But it was more than that. It was like I wasn't here. Like I was in a coma or..."

Rachel sat up. Walter didn't like the look that had come over her face. And sure enough, a wave of fear washed over him.

"What's wrong?" He leaned in towards her.

"Walter...how hard was it to wake me up?"

Walter took a deep breath. "I couldn't. I had to use my mind to pull you out. It was like you were almost dead."

"Like I was dead..." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Or that I was hibernating?"

(((((O))))))

Rachel had been told before of how difficult it was to wake her up when she was in the Tower. It was impossible. She had to wake up on her own. Astral projecting into the Tower was dangerous as her vitals would become very light, almost unreadable. She would eventually die if she stayed like that for too long. But she hadn't been in the Tower this time. At least not that she had been consciously aware of. And then when she had finally started to wake up, she had to fight tooth and nail. And if Walter couldn't even wake her up without using his powers...

"Rachel?"

Her eyes met Walter's.

"Sweetheart, I don't frighten easily, but you are really starting to scare the fuck out of me. What do you mean, hibernate?"

"I need to talk to Pennywise." She started to pull the covers back, but Walter put his hand down, holding them in place.

"Pennywise? What does this have to do with Pennywise?"

"You asked me about hibernating," she shot back. "Pennywise hibernates. Before we ended up in Mid-World, he was planning to go into hibernation. He said he was going to take me with him."

"But he's not going to do that. I am not letting you anywhere near

him!"

"You don't have to! Walter...me and Pennywise are mated. And you said over a week ago that you had purged all of him from me. Right?"

Walter made a fist. He didn't say anything, but the look on his face was murderous. Rachel's throat tightened.

"Walter...please tell me that you took all of Pennywise out of me. I mean, I don't even crave blood anymore. You had to have-"

"You're not completely human anymore, Rachel."

"But I don't...My eyes are back to normal. And like I said, my blood craving is gone."

He leaned in towards her. "Your blood craving is gone, yes. But you've still been...changed. You are what is called a hama-demon. A human who has been turned demonlike by a demon."

Rachel slowly shook her head. "No."

"Yes. You are not human anymore, Rachel." Walter knelt on one knee next to her bed. "Haven't you ever wondered why I never tried to kill our child like I did Pennywise's?"

"Often."

"Your daughter would have been like her father. She would have fled off of fear, and eventually she would have fed off of you. Your blood, your nutrients. Everything would have gone to her until you were nothing left but a dried up husk."

Rachel took a shaky breath. Walter had never explained to her why he had thought it would have been bad for her to continue to carry Eleanor, although she had eventually figured it out herself.

"And why haven't you tried to kill our son?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

He rubbed her belly through the blankets. "Because he is mine. And because you are a *lot* stronger than you were months ago. Or even a

couple of weeks ago. Plus being part demon yourself..."

"Shit."

"Rachel, you had to have known-"

"I didn't think of myself as an actual demon alright?" she cried. "I know a couple of people called me demon whore, the preacher and Sheb. But I thought it was because they could tell what Pennywise was. I never thought..." She shook her head. "I never thought of myself as a demon," she whispered. "Just that I wasn't completely human anymore. Like I was more of an..." she shrugged, "alien. Maybe even some kind of vampire because of the blood. I don't want to be evil. Maturin doesn't see it that way. He even made me a guardian. And now I feel like I fail him every time I turn around."

(((((O))))))

"Maturin." Walter stood. Just saying the Turtle's name felt like acid on his tongue. He turned his back to Rachel. "You've spoken to Maturin?"

"Yes. Do you know him? Or know of him?"

"I have never met him personally."

So it was confirmed now. She was a Guardian. Had she seen the Turtle in person? Or any of the other Guardians? Had she actually been to the Tower? Is that where she had been just now?

(((((O))))))

Walter stood with his hands on his hips, facing away from her. She had taken a huge risk mentioning Maturin. But she was tired of secrets. There had been nothing but secrets between her and Pennywise. And even though she knew that there was plenty that Walter was keeping from her, maybe if she opened up to him, he might start being able to open up to her. She drew back the covers and climbed out of bed.

"Walter...I know what this sounds like. But I am not your enemy. You have to believe that. But of course I don't want the Tower brought

down. I mean, sure there are a lot of assholes and all-around bad people out there, but there are good ones too, plenty of them. But that doesn't bother me right now. What happened in here just now does. I don't want to be Pennywise's mate anymore. I don't want to be like him at all. I'm worried, Walter. I'm worried about my baby. I'm worried about myself." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I can't live being afraid to fall asleep."

"No, that's not gonna work."

"So what do we do?" Rachel shrugged one shoulder. "We need to talk to Pennywise. And I need to end things with him." She placed a hand on Walter's arm.

What do we do? We. A war raged within Walter. Why, just why did he have to fall in love with her? He could have just stuck to his course, worked on destroying the Tower, but no. Maybe he should just let her fall asleep. He felt her hand on his arm, and it was enough to help him decide. He would find Pennywise. And he would force the demon clown to relinquish his claim on her. It was the only way to free her.

"Walter?"

Her soft voice was almost enough to undo him.

"Please say something."

"You're going to stay here. I'll take care of Pennywise."

"What?!"

Walter turned. "I told you I don't want you anywhere around him."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "But it's my problem."

"I'm not saying it again. Stay here. Find something to occupy your time."

He moved past her, but she grabbed at him.

"Walter, you can't just-"

"Find something to do, Rachel. Eat, read, talk to yourself, pleasure yourself. I don't care what, just do *not* let yourself fall asleep."

Rachel dropped her arm. She felt her chest tighten as Walter opened the door and left. She had never been so afraid to be left alone. What she wouldn't give to have Roland to talk to. He had become a master at helping her to stay calm.

She glanced over at her tray of food. It was covered, so she couldn't see what was under the shiny silver lid. She couldn't eat just yet. And pleasure herself? Leave it up to Walter to throw that in there as a suggestion. The only other option was reading.

She decided to peruse the shelves. The books were all leather bound. She picked up one of them. It was on teleportation. Another was on necromancy. Yikes. A third one she picked up picked her interest right away. Astral projection. She could do that. She had to be deeply unconscious at the time and she had no control over it, but still. Her stomach grumbled. Rachel sighed. She needed to eat something first. But at least she had found something to occupy her time until Walter came back. If he ever came back. She could only imagine the conversation he would have with her mate. That was one situation she would not want to be a fly on the wall to witness.

---

Pennywise sat with his eyes closed as the wind pelted him with more dust and grit. He welcomed it. He could smell the gunslinger. He had to be getting close now. And there was another lingering scent as well. One that Pennywise had never smelt before.

His eyes flew open as he heard whistling behind him. He whirled around.

"Great view isn't it?" Walter leaned back casually against a boulder. "Like you can almost see the whole world from up here."

Pennywise grit his teeth at the easy smile on the sorcerer's face. He was in no mood for pleasantries.

"Where is she?"

Walter didn't acknowledge Pennywise. He lifted his hand, revealing a red apple. "Being taken care of," he replied casually. He took a bite. "I hope you don't mind. I haven't exactly been able to eat yet this morning. Had a little..." he tilted his head to the side, "problem to deal with."

"And you think I care of your petty problems?" Pennywise slowly advanced on Walter. His fingers turned into wolf fingers, claws extended.

"You will if they involve your mate."

Pennywise froze. The grimace on his face fell.

"You stay awake for what..." Walter spread out his hand, "a year. And then you hibernate. How long do you hibernate for?" He withdrew from his resting place, his full attention now on the clown before him.

Pennywise's eyes were slits. "What are you getting at sorcerer?"

"Last night when I went to Rachel she was...fine. Sleeping peacefully. This morning I couldn't budge her at all. I tried to slip into her subconscious, but it was like she wasn't even there."

Pennywise's breath caught. Had she slipped into hibernation? How could that be? Walter had broken their link. Unless... And Walter had gone to her. Had he bedded her? And if so, how many times? It hadn't even been two days.

"You woke her? Is she awake?"

Walter gave a nod. "She is now. But it was a struggle. So let me ask you again. How long do you sleep for?"

"Twenty-seven years."

(((O)))

Now it was Walter's turn to try not to panic. Twenty-seven years. What would that do to Rachel? And what about the fetus growing inside her?

"Will she do that? Will she go into hibernation?"

Walter didn't like the look of unease that came over the clown's face. And he liked even less the answer that he gave.

"I am not...sure. Even when she was bonded to me, she would have had the choice. I would have given her the choice."

Walter scowled. "Would you have now? You seriously would have let her grow old?"

Pennywise stood at his full height. He let out a growl. Any normal human would have cowered before him. "She is my mate. And there is nothing you can do to change that. No matter how many times you claim her body, I have made claim on her soul. I was her first. She gave herself to me in every way. She will never deny me."

(((((O))))))

Rachel threw another book on the bed. Elemental magic? She was starting to get a headache. This was getting crazy. An idea suddenly popped into her head. She and Walter and Pennywise raising her baby together. She shook her head at the preposterousness of it.

"One big happy demon family," she muttered bitterly.

She laid back on the bed. She still didn't know what was going on with Roland. And now that Walter was gone, she was really becoming upset by the fact that he still hadn't let her see what was going on with the gunslinger. Maybe...

Another thought came to her. Could she be able to find Roland? Use astral projection to do it? Would she be able to control it this time? Did she dare even try?

Her stomach knotted with nervousness. She took a deep breath. Once again she was holed up in a bedroom while her man went about his business. She started to feel shaky. This was ridiculous. She was a Guardian of the Tower. She shouldn't have to let any man tell her what to do. She closed her eyes and lay as flat as she could, trying to even out her breathing. She tried to focus on the air around her. She would start with that. Time to try to see what she was really capable



of.

(((((O))))))

Something in Walter's brain clicked. Deny Pennywise? Was that the answer? Rachel would have to deny him?

(((((O))))))

Rachel felt herself drift upward. She felt as light as a breeze. She glanced down at herself. She was still in her silk nightgown, but now she was totally transparent. She turned around and saw herself lying in Walter's bed, totally still. Her face lit up in a grin. Now to find Roland.

(((((O))))))

"Oh you think she won't will you? After all you've put her through?"

"And what of you, miller's boy? You took my offspring from me. From her. You think she will ever forgive you for that?"

The two squared off now. Pennywise still had his claws extended and Walter had his hands calmly behind his back as usual. Behind him a large cluster of rocks slowly lifted off the ground.

(((((O))))))

Rachel had never felt more alive. Or free. She was like a breeze. She was the very air itself. She zoomed along past the canyon where she had started out at, but now she had gotten to a forest. She spread her arms out alongside her. She saw rugged mountains in the distance, their rock a rich caramel color. The desert must be just beyond that. She headed in that direction.

(((((O))))))

"You and I both know that attacking me will not be able to help Rachel. No one else knows where she is, and you wouldn't be able to kill me anyway," Walter called to Pennywise.

The clown's front teeth elongated to needle sharp points and it took

all Walter had not to roll his eyes.

"And you will tell me! She does not belong to you!"

Walter sneered at the clown. "Maybe not. But she hasn't asked to leave yet either. She's got it too made, Pennywise. Food. Shelter. A nice comfortable bed to sleep in."

Pennywise got into a crouch. Walter could only imagine the amount of restraint it was taking the demon to not launch himself at him. Walter could have left it right there. Teleported out of there. But of course not. It was a decision he would soon come to regret.

"And a man to fill it with her. A man. One who will never leave her."

Pennywise snarled. "You think yourself better than me? Do you really wish she will stay with you after she knows the truth?" His snarl turned into a grin. "Go ahead. Bed her. Claim her. It is her who will have to make the choice. Her who will have to renounce my bond with her. You think you can destroy what we are?" Pennywise let out a loud, maniacal chuckle. "I will destroy you first!"

The clown lunged. But Walter was ready. He flung out his arms. A barrage of dirt and sharp rock flew up in the air. It hit the clown with full force. Pennywise let out a roar, closing his eyes and stopping in his tracks. It only lasted a second, but it was all Walter needed. He raised his hand in the air and a large boulder lifted as if on its own accord.

(((O)))

Rachel felt it before she saw them. The crackle of magic in the air. She had decided to fly closer to the tree line and was surprised farther when she was able to control the height of her movement as well as the direction. And when she saw them on the mountaintop, she froze. Pennywise was standing before Walter. She saw a large boulder rise up in the air. Why wasn't Pennywise moving. The boulder went hurtling towards him. Rachel flung out an arm.

"NOOOOO!"

A large crack shook the air, like a thunder bolt, as she flung her

Tower magic, full force, straight at Walter. As she did so, she felt her body start to coalesce rapidly. Too rapidly. She started to fall as she felt her body catch up to her astral form. Wind rushed past her. And when she hit a tree branch, the wind was knocked out of her, the pain all too real now. She hit another branch. A stabbing pain filled her forearm. She continued to fall, bouncing off limb after limb, which sliced through her arms, pulled at her nightgown. She finally hit the ground.

And blacked out.

(((O)))

Walter heard the keening yell. Heard the crack. He glanced upwards just in time to see a gray ripple come hurtling at him. He teleported. On the ground, Roland and Jake glanced up at the sky, hearing the same thing.

"Did you hear that?" Jake asked.

"Yes." Roland's heart pounded. It had sounded like a woman. And it had sent chills down his spine.

"What do you think it was?"

"I don't know. But I think we should go find out."

"But we'll be going backwards," Jake pointed out.

"Not too far. I won't take long."

All Roland could think about was Rachel. He remembered what Jake had told him about his vision of her with wings. Had the boy's vision finally come to fruition?

---

Walter tore down the hallway. He was almost to his bedroom when a two-skin accosted him.

"Sir, I heard her scream. I was walking by-"

Walter shoved the man aside. The door was partly open. Sure

enough, Rachel was gone. But there were book scattered on the bed. Walter idly glanced at their titles. His eyes stopped when he saw one on astral projection.

"Clever girl."

He turned and left. When he got to his follower outside, he said, "Gather the Taheen. I want them to do a thorough sweep of the woods north of the Mohain, right on this side of the mountains."

"What exactly are we looking for, sir?"

"My bride," Walter spat.

---

They went in the direction the sound had come from. Roland could still hear her cry in the back of his mind, as if it had been tattooed there. If it had been her, something terribly awful must have happened. It didn't take them long to find her, but when they did, Roland stopped. And so did his heart.

She was lying in a clearing, on her back. One bare arm was flung out to the side. As he got closer, Roland felt bile rise up in his throat. Rachel's legs were bent. The dark dress went to just below her knees. Roland never would have made her dress like that. Not unless it was just him around. And only after they would have decided to farther their relationship. Looking at her now, he wondered if he would ever get to know what would have become of them. Rachel's arms and face were littered with thin red marks. Roland's arms shook. He stood over her.

"Roland. Look." Jake said.

Roland didn't want to. But he tore his eyes away from her, and when he saw what the boy was pointing at, Roland fell to his knees.

Feathers. Burning feathers lay scattered around Rachel. Roland shook violently now. He couldn't even stop the tears as they came to his eyes. Rachel still hadn't moved. Roland had all too recently felt fear of this level. He closed his eyes and saw Walter scoop her up. He opened his eyes again and brought a shaky hand to place it on her

arm. The tears fell. He wondered if she was still alive. And if it even mattered any more. But more importantly, he wondered if it would be for the best...

If she wasn't.

## 9. Chapter 9

There was no denying that she wasn't in Walter's bed anymore. The pain. It assaulted not just her nerves, but the very bones in her back felt like someone had broken them apart and then reformed them. She tried to sit up and whimpered as a jolt of pain shot through the middle of her back. She was covered up with something. A brown coat. She laid her head back down, closing her eyes and jumped when she felt a hand on her temple. Her eyes flew open.

She had never been so happy to see the person now crouched over her.

"Roland," she breathed.

The gunslinger rubbed her temples. "I'm here. Can you move?"

"My back," she gasped at another jolt of pain, "hurts. It doesn't," she swallowed the lump in her parched throat, "feel right."

"Can you roll onto your side?"

Rachel did as he asked. It didn't take as much effort and pain as trying to sit up did. She felt a bead of sweat drip down her forehead.

"Oh my God."

She didn't like the fear she heard in Roland's voice. "What?"

"Uh...Roland, is that normal?"

Another voice. This one a boy's.

"Roland, who is that?" She craned to look over her shoulder and could just barely make out a tall lanky boy with light brown hair. "Roland, can you please tell me what the hell you're looking at?"

"Your back looks like...it has something trying to poke out of it. Two of them. They look kind of pointy."

That was the boy again. Rachel felt a cold fear wash over her. Poking

out? She remembered a dream she had had several nights ago. She was flying.

And she'd had wings. She closed her eyes and tried like hell to fight her rapidly rising panic.

"Rachel?"

She felt Roland's hand on her shoulder.

"Can you try to sit up?"

As she did so, she felt a shifting in her back and a tight pull. She stopped halfway up.

"Roland..."

She closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath. Something was not right, was changing in her somehow. She let out a sob.

Roland squeezed her arm. "I'm right here. Whatever you need, I'm right here."

And he was. He finally was. But deep inside she ached for Walter. Even if he wouldn't know what was going on, he could at least take some of the pain away. She imagined his arms around her, holding her tight against him. Somehow the image helped her to calm down a bit. She took a deep breath.

Another step towards her destined path. That's all this was. And like everything else incredibly crazy or painful that had happened to her, she was just going to have to go with it.

She clutched at the coat that she now realized had been Roland's. He was so thoughtful. And he cared for her so deeply. She hated that she would have to hurt him, but right now there was no way that she could think of him as more than a friend. But friendship was all she could afford to give. And it was the best thing she needed. She noticed the scratches on her arms. And then she remembered.

She handed Roland his coat and at the same time staggered to her feet. She glanced up at the trees above her.

"I fell." Her voice was hollow.

"Yes, sweetheart, you did."

The boy inclined his head towards Rachel. "So you *were* flying."

She glanced at him. "Astral projection. I was looking for Roland. And I..." She was afraid to ask, but she had to. "Roland, have you seen Pennywise? Or Walter? Since you found me?"

He shook his head. "No one. Why do you ask?"

"I saw them." She pointed upwards and to the right. "They were on top of the mountain. They were fighting, or were about to."

She took a few steps forward. The ground was cool and lumpy beneath her feet. She glanced down. Of course she was barefooted. And still in her nightgown to boot.

She sighed. "I need to sit down."

"They had a stump somewhere towards here." The boy pointed behind him.

Rachel's steps were tentative as she followed him. Roland kept his hand on her back the whole time. Still supportive and protective.

"Wait, so Walter was here?" the boy inquired.

"Near here. On the mountain. I don't know where he is now."

Sure enough there was a fallen tree. The edges of the stump were jagged.

"Here." Roland placed his coat on the stump, the outside facing down.

Rachel sat down heavily. Roland crouched down in front of her.

"Are you...hurting anywhere else? Besides your back and limbs?"

Rachel glanced at him from under her eyelashes. Did he mean the baby? Or was he implying something else?



"I'm fine."

Surprisingly her stomach did feel fine. Not a trace of nausea at all. Her back however... It did feel like something was trying to poke out of her back. She let out a huff of air and rocked forward.

Roland's hand covered one of hers. "What is it?"

"I just..." She glanced away from him, her anxiety starting to spike again.

"Is it the baby?"

She shook her head. "My back, Roland. What if it stays like this? I don't know what it means."

She didn't notice Roland glance at the boy.

"I think I might."

Rachel glanced up then. The boy reached down into some kind of bag. He seemed to be looking for something. Finally he pulled out a piece of paper. Rachel's eyes grew to the size of saucers as she took the page from his hand.

It was her. It had to be her. It was from behind, but she recognized her own side profile. But that wasn't what freaked her out.

Wings. She had wings. And she was holding some kind of sword.

She glanced up in awe at the boy. "Who *are* you?"

---

The right side of Pennywise's face still burned. Luckily his costume had absorbed most of the magical blast or he would have been in trouble. He could still hear his mate's unearthly scream, like a banshee or a demon. Who exactly had she been trying to hit, he wondered as he slunk off into the trees. He wanted to tear Walter apart. Tear him apart and then feast on his flesh. So his mate was now officially Walter's mistress. His claws extended at the thought. He needed to rest. And to feed. He could always find his mate later. He always did.

And he always would. And no one was going to change that.

---

Rachel's spirit felt numb as she listened to the boy, he had introduced himself as Jake Chambers, completed his story. So Walter was just like Pennywise after all, targeting children. She didn't realize Jake had finished speaking until she glanced up and saw both him and Roland staring mutely at her.

Her eyes traveled back down to the small pile of drawings in her hands. The top one was of Walter in front of the pyramid. There had also been one of her and Roman. And of course the one where she had wings. She pulled out the one of the Tower. For some reason she was filled with a feeling of homesickness.

"And you said you went through a portal in New York?"

Jake gave a nod. "Yeah."

Rachel stood and held out his drawings. She cocked an eyebrow at him. "In a house on Dutch Hill?"

And astonished look came over Jake's face. He glanced at Roland, then back at Rachel. "Yeah. That's it. How did you know?" He took the drawings from her.

Rachel stepped closer to him. "Because I went there. Yesterday."

Now it was Roland's turn to look uncomfortable. Rachel turned her gaze upon him.

"With Walter."

The air grew so still, Rachel could hear crickets chirping.

"Walter took you...back to your world."

Rachel nodded at the gunslinger.

"So you were with Walter this whole time," said Jake.

Rachel's stomach knotted. *Please don't ask for details.*

"What's he like? Is he as bad as I've seen in my dreams?"

"He's uh...complicated." Rachel crossed her arms over her midsection and turned her back to Jake. "Very complicated. I've never..." she saw in her mind Walter standing before her in his bedroom. Never advancing on her. Giving her her space. Making sure she was cared for. "I've never met anyone like him."

"And let's just hope you never have to again."

Rachel felt Roland's hand on her arm, his touch as soft as his voice. She wanted to tell him how wrong she was. That things weren't over between her and Walter. Not even by a long shot. But instead she decided to study her surroundings. Large rocky formations dotted the landscape, but the trees were by far more numerous. Definitely some kind of foothills.

"So where are we, anyway?" She took a step forward, causing Roland to lose contact with her.

"The Great Western Woods. This is just the tip of it. We still have a long way to go."

She turned back to face Roland. "Go where?"

"There is a village of seers. They will be able to read Jake's visions."

Rachel raised her eyebrows at Roland. *So I guess they'll want to read my mind as well. That should be interesting.* "Well that's good. We can find out where Walter is, because I have no idea. I just know which direction. I didn't pay attention to how far I traveled."

"So that pyramid thing in my picture. That's where Walter was keeping you at?"

Rachel nodded.

"You didn't see the machine did you?" Jake asked.

"I just saw some computers. I think it helps them to monitor what's going on with the portals. Maybe other things as well, but I don't know what."

"We need to get moving. I would...prefer if you were better dressed," said Roland.

He was still holding on to his coat.

"Yeah um...where are your shoes?" Jake asked.

Rachel sighed. "Walter's bedroom. I hadn't been up for long when I decided to look for Roland."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she wished she could take them back. She had pretty much just verified that there was something going on between her and Walter. Her face flamed up as her gaze went back and forth between Roland and Jake. Roland's expression had grown hard and she had known him long enough to be able to tell that he was trying to not say something. And Jake. She had seen that expression before. The day Bill had found out about her and Pennywise.

She was tired of talking. Hell she was just tired period. Her back was killing her. And several spots on her arms and legs burned like fire from all the cuts and flash burns from falling through the trees. But Roland was right. They needed to move onward. But first she needed to find some adequate foot apparel. And since hers were miles and miles away, she would have to try something else.

Jake scratched his head. "So uh...which way should we head?"

Rachel automatically pointed to the north. "Somewhere in that general direction."

"I think he's talking about the seers."

"Oh." *Shit.* Rachel dropped her arm.

She was automatically thinking about the pyramid. She shot Roland a sheepish glance. He frowned at her. Time to lighten the mood.

"So," she clasped her hands together, lacing her fingertips, "shoes. I need shoes." She pointed at her feet.

"I guess there's no Macy's around here," Jake said.

Rachel laughed. "You got that right."

"Macy's?" Roland shot them a confused glance.

"It's a department store," Rachel confirmed. "No, I uh...I've been wanting to try something. Something that I've seen Walter do."

"Rachel..."

Roland's tone was both warning and worry. She ignored him. She tried to imagine what her boots felt like on her feet. Head tilted to the sky, she closed her eyes and straightened out her arms, fingers pointed down towards her feet. She had never actually tried to use Walter's magic before, so to be on the safe side, she tapped into her Tower magic just enough to keep her stable.

Her whole body started to feel different. It was the same sensation that she had felt the first time she had fully tapped into her powers, back in Tull. A ripple of energy spread through her frame. She started breathing heavily. She felt a warm sensation around her feet and then she could feel it. Something was definitely forming down there. And then she felt something else, something soft and sinewy slithering across her body. The sinews started to thicken and widen. She started shaking. And then she lost it. She collapsed to her knees. She opened her eyes and gasped. A light grey shimmer surrounded her, but evaporated quick as mist. Her stomach heaved. She gagged.

Roland crouched down next to her and put a hand on her back. "Breathe."

She swallowed as her gag reflex flared up.

Roland rubbed her back. "Try to focus on your breathing."

She held her breath. Blew it out through her mouth. She shivered. Roland draped his coat over her. Then he moved in front of her.

She smiled at him. "I got my boots back," she said with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes you did." He rubbed her temple. "Can you stand?"

Rachel stood on shaky feet. She swayed. Roland put his hands on her shoulders. "You should sit down for a minute."

She didn't argue with him on that one. She pulled Roland's jacket around her and like a drunk person, made her way back to her stump. The fact that she felt soles beneath her feet and not the hard ground anymore was a hallmark to the fact that her powers were indeed intensifying.

And for just an instant she felt a pang of sadness that Walter hadn't been there to witness it.

She wiggled her feet around and without warning, tears started to rise up. Roland crouched down in front of her and gently placed his right hand on her left forearm.

"I did it, Roland. I actually did it." A tear fell. "I can control my powers."

"You did good, sweetheart. You did really good. And you got free from Walter."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Two more tears fell. Roland started to massage her arm with his thumb. He had no idea, absolutely no idea that the past day and the evening before that had been not only one of the nicest that she had had since coming to Mid-World, but one of the nicest she'd had in almost two months. She and Pennywise's relationship had crumbled so fast, almost as fast as it had begun. And even though she had yet to develop any true romantic feelings towards Walter, she had felt a peace with him that she had been beginning to believe would never be possible for her again. And now she had found out that Walter was stealing children with psychic abilities to help bring down the Tower. Surprisingly she wasn't as upset as she should have been. Maybe it was because she was so used to guys that were into that kind of stuff. Or maybe it was because no matter what, Walter wasn't redeemable. Or it could be because maybe, just maybe...

He was.

And that was the one hope, above all others, that she was not letting

go of.

No matter what.

## 10. Chapter 10

*Author's note: I am sooo sorry that it took me so long to update. I have been stuck on this chapter for a long time. I didn't know what was going to happen in it.*

"So where was you and Roman's first date?"

"At the Rocket. It's a diner."

"How big is Derry?"

Rachel smiled. She loved how curious Jake was. At least it was keeping her mind off of her romantic life and the physical pain she was in. Rachel's foot crunched on another stick. Even if they hadn't been talking, if Pennywise or Walter were still around, just their loud footsteps would give them away.

"It's pretty small. And very old fashioned. You probably wouldn't like it if you're so used to modern technology and a big city. Have you ever walked on the Brooklyn Bridge?"

"Yeah. I've been there. Have you?"

Rachel nodded. "Walter took me there. It's very noisy but I love the view."

Jake stopped short, his mouth gaping open. "Walter took you on a date?"

"Well I uh...I wouldn't really call it that. We went to see about the portal and then he bought me a hotdog. If bought is the word you want to use." She rolled her eyes. "He's something else, yeah. Oh, and he took me to one of his hideouts. I didn't see how to get there though. He blinded me."

"What?!" Roland's hand was on her arm in a nanosecond. "Walter did what?"

Oh shit. "Not really. He just..." Rachel waved her hand in front of her eyes, "he put some kind of mist over my eyes. It was an illusion. Still



scary though."

Rachel could practically see Roland's jaw clench. She was actually nervous. They had been walking through the woods for a while now and Roland had asked her nothing about her time with Walter at all.

"Roland, if there's something you want to say, please do so. You know I'm not good with beating around the bush." She shifted her weight to one foot.

Roland opened his mouth to speak and then glanced over at Jake. Poor boy. He was so in the dark about what all had happened the last couple of weeks. He hadn't even asked Rachel about her pregnancy. And she hoped he never would.

"I'm just worried about you," Roland finally answered.

Rachel gave him a tired smile. "You and me both."

Later that afternoon, a thick mist started to creep in.

"You know, this is kind of like on the Wizard of Oz when they get to the Wicked Witch's forest," Rachel idly commented.

"You think flying monkeys are going to come out?" Jake shot her a half grin.

"I take it that's another reference from your world," Roland commented.

Rachel could hear a hint of sadness in his voice. Was he jealous that Rachel had someone to talk to about her own culture now?

Rachel sighed. "Not monkeys, no. I don't know what to expect. That's what scares me."

"You know I'm not going to let anything happen to you?" Roland raised an eyebrow at her.

She smiled. "I know. I just wished I knew what-

Roland put out his arm to stop her.

"What is it?"

Roland pulled out one of his pistols. "I don't know."

Then Rachel heard it. A loud rustling noise coming from the hill to their left. Part of her wanted to summon her magic just to be ready. Then all was quiet.

"If that is who I think it is..." Rachel muttered with a scowl.

"Then he's going to have a fight on his hands," Roland finished.

Jake shot them a worried glance. "W-who do you think it is? Walter? Pennywise?"

"My guess is on Pennywise. Stay alert," Rachel told Jake.

Rachel had told Jake about her mate. Or at least somewhat. She had said he didn't like children. Which he didn't, depending on how you looked at it.

They went further into the woods without any issues. Rachel's nerves were becoming more wound by the minute though. She wanted to scream at whoever was watching them to come out. Finally at some point, they were coming around a bend in a group of trees. Roland pulled Jake back. He motioned for him and Rachel to get down.

"What's-"

Roland put his finger over his mouth for her to hush. He pointed through the brush. Rachel looked around until she saw it. Taheen. Several of them. They were going in the opposite direction. They hadn't seen Rachel's group.

"What are they?" Jake asked quietly.

"Taheen. Walter's minions. We need to be more careful," Roland responded.

Rachel's heart started pounding. Were they looking for her or Jake? She hated not knowing. If she would know for sure it was her, she would go with them in a heartbeat. But would she? Could she do that

to Roland? She glanced over at him and saw him watching her. She stood. Either way, she wasn't afraid. If the Taheen were here for Jake and they tried to attack, she and Roland could easily pick them off. She started to take off, but Roland grabbed her wrist.

He stood. "I need to talk to you."

Rachel shifted her posture. "Alright."

"Stay close," Roland told Jake.

Roland led her off a little ways. "You know I've been trying my best not to ask anything. But since you got back," Roland sighed, "you haven't been yourself."

Rachel snorted. "I'm growing wings, Roland. That's not normal for anyone."

"You know what I mean."

"Well obviously I don't," she retorted. "I've been through hell these last couple of weeks, Roland." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"I know that." He gently grabbed both of her arms right above her elbows and looked her square in the face. "Whatever Walter has done to you...you don't have to be ashamed. Let me help you."

Rachel lowered her gaze with a sigh. So that was it. He thought Walter had forced himself on her while she was with him.

"I swear to you, Rachel...I will do everything in my power to stop him. He won't hurt you again."

"Walter has *never* hurt me, Roland." Now it was her turn to meet his gaze. "Don't you get it? I mean, yes, he may have in the beginning. On that one night. But Pennywise has done exponentially worse." She pulled herself out of Roland's grasp. "If anything Walter saved me from that. And he saved me again. Two days ago. I would be *dead*, Roland, if it wasn't for him."

Roland scowled at her.

"You know it's true. It has been hell for me not knowing what was going on with you. And I knew you had to be worried sick about me. I'm sorry for that. Walter was going to let me see you. Not in person, but he said he had a way to let me see that you were alright. The only reason why he didn't was because of everything that came up with Jake. And now Walter may or may not be looking for him. Or the Taheen could be looking for me. I don't know." She shrugged both shoulders. "Walter never hurt me, Roland. These last couple of days, he didn't..." she shook her head, "he didn't hurt me. In any way. We shared a..." she shifted from one foot to the other, "we shared his bed together. Last night. But no sex. At all. He took care of me. And if I've been," another sigh, "if I've been acting weird, it's because I feel lost without him. I feel...vulnerable. And now I'm hurting and there's..." She scrunched her face up as a wave of emotion rushed through her. "There's nothing that I can do about it. I just feel so lost."

The tears fell now. Rachel put her hand over her mouth. She heard someone coming and she and Roland both glanced in that direction. It was Jake.

"Uh...guys...you might want to see this." He pointed back in the direction he had just come from.

Rachel quickly wiped her tears and without giving Roland another glance, followed Jake. She didn't see anything at first that would warrant attention, but as soon as Jake pointed upwards, her mouth fell open.

It was a tall, metal sign, like you would see at a carnival. But it wasn't the presence of the sign that made Rachel stare in shock. It was the wording on it. One word.

### *PENNYWISE*

Several emotions warred inside Rachel—awe, fear, joy, confusion. Pennywise had been to Mid-world. And from the looks of it...

He'd had his own amusement park.

She and Jake walked underneath the sign. A large Ferris wheel came into view. It was even more dilapidated than the sign. Images flashed

through her mind of when Roman had taken her for their date underneath the Neibolt house.

The date that had been a lie.

Pennywise was the master of creating illusions, but this...to actually see that he had at some point existed in another realm...somehow that, more than anything else that she had seen and experienced with him in the last several months, brought it home for her.

Pennywise was an alien. He was a demonic, child eating alien. How old was he even? Where did he even come from? Was it Mid-world? Had this really been his amusement park or was it just where he had gotten that particular persona from?

Rachel shook her head. "I can't believe this. Pennywise has been to Mid-world. Why hasn't he told me?"

"Probably for the same reason he didn't tell you a lot of things," came Roland's terse answer.

"Yeah, but this..." Rachel pointed back at the sign. "He could have told me this. I know he's not even really a clown. He could have-" She stopped when a bout of nausea flared up. She put her hand on her stomach and rubbed it.

"You ok?" Jake asked her.

Rachel nodded. "It's just nausea. I get that sometimes."

"From the baby?"

Rachel regarded his now downtrodden face. She smiled at him. "I'm okay yeah. My baby's gonna be strong. But the thing is...so am I."

"That you are, my dear."

Rachel whirled around. Pennywise was standing just feet away from them.

"Penny," she breathed.

"What's wrong, dearest?" He smiled at her. It gave her the chills, and not one of pleasure either. "Aren't you going to give me a hug?"

He stepped towards them but both Rachel and Jake backed up. Roland came forward, one of his guns pointed at the clown's head.

"You just can't leave her alone, can you?" Roland asked.

"I hear congratulations are in order," Pennywise told Rachel.

"What are you talking about?" Rachel snapped.

"Oh you haven't told him?" Pennywise's mouth fell open into an 'o' as he turned his gaze towards Roland.

"Told him what, Pennywise? Spit it out!"

"Your new beau." Pennywise's yellow gaze was now completely on Rachel. "Your new *mate*."

His cherry red mouth was twisted in a sneer. And the right side of his face was all jacked up. Like someone had poured acid on it. Had she done that? Or had it been Walter?

"Penny...you know things weren't working out between us."

"And so you bedded him! You bedded him like the *whore* you are!" Pennywise screeched.

"And what if I did? Why should you care?" Rachel hollered back. "You don't care if I fuck half the men in Mid-world so long as I'm *yours*, that I belong to *you*! Well I'm sick of belonging to you, Pennywise!" Her hands were at her side, balled into fists. "So Walter told you we're sleeping together, did he? Did he tell you about *my* sleep?" She pointed at herself. "Did he tell you that he couldn't wake me up this morning?" She took a few steps toward him. "Is that what you want? For me to sleep with *you* instead? A deep, dark sleep from which there is no waking? Until I've lost *everything*?" She snarled that last word. "I am PREGNANT! What do you think that's going to do to me? To me and Walter's baby?"

She shook her head slowly as angry tears obscured her vision. "All I

wanted was your love," she said in a small voice.

*"Deny him."*

Rachel's eyes widened. Walter! Was he watching her right now?

*"Deny him, my love. It is the only way you will be free from him."*

"I can't do this anymore, Pennywise. And I won't." She took a few steps closer to him. "I deny you. By all that is good and right in this universe, I deny you."

Pennywise's eyes turned blood red. "Deny me? You will deny yourself as well. You will cease to exist."

Rachel's blood ran cold. Was this it then? Was she to die right here? After all she had been through, did it really matter anymore? She glanced around. If she was going to die, then she might as well take him with her. Her eyes landed on a pile of crumpled up long, skinny pieces of metal. She didn't know what it had once been. She didn't care. She made her hand into a fist behind her.

And she concentrated.

"And if I die, then so be it." The tears started to fall. "But at least I will be free of you."

She straightened her posture. "I, Rachel Porter, Guardian of the Dark Tower, deny you Pennywise." She felt a pointed scrap of metal form in her fist. "I deny your claim on me."

Pennywise snarled.

"I deny your claim on my soul."

She clasped the metal so tightly, she felt it cut into her palm.

"I deny your claim on my life."

She was crying so much now that she couldn't see. But she didn't have to. She knew exactly where Pennywise's heart was.

Because it didn't exist.

"I love you."

With an inhuman screech, she lunged. Pennywise was faster. He leapt on her and at the same instant, Rachel heard a gunshot. She landed hard on her back.

"AAAHHHHHH!"

It felt like two knives had gone through her back. Pennywise had crushed her against the ground. His mouth was contorted. Rachel felt something wet spraying the front of her nightgown. Finally Pennywise staggered off of her.

The metal was sticking out of his chest.

Rachel couldn't move. Her entire back was in agony. She watched Pennywise grab at the piece of metal. He started to pull it out. Rachel heard Roland cock his gun. Saw him point it at Pennywise.

She laid back on the ground. Stared straight up at the mist obscured trees.

*BANG!*

---

**Me: \*hides behind Walter\* save me!**

**Walter: You asked for this, sweetheart.**

**Me: Yeah but they had to have known something like this was coming.**



## 11. Chapter 11

*Water spots glinted across Roman's face from the cool lake water. His lips were parted slightly as Rachel ran her hands across his shoulders.*

*"Please stop scaring the children."*

*Roman smiled.*

*"Kitten...you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."*

*They kissed.*

Pain. It lanced across Rachel's back, rippled through her soul. Pennywise was gone. Her lover, the father of her miscarried child, the biggest source of both her joy and sorrow was dead. Rachel heard a loud wailing sound and realized it was coming from herself. She vaguely heard someone close by gently say her name. Then she felt a hand on her arm try to pry away her hands that were covering her face.

"Rachel." Roland rubbed her arm. "Rachel. I am so sorry. You know I had to do it."

"But why did he have to die?" she wailed.

"He was going to kill you. He would have killed all of us."

"Do you...need me to do anything?" Jake asked.

"Just stay back for now. I don't know if she's hurt."

(((O)))

Rachel had blood splatters on the front of her gown. Roland knew right away that those were from Pennywise. He held her arms back from her face, which was streaked from tears that continued to fall.

"Rachel, are you hurting anywhere?"

"Pennywise is gone!" she cried out.

Roland sighed. "I know. But are you hurt. I really need you to tell me."

"What difference does it make if he's dead?"

She started crying harder. Roland was getting nowhere. He wouldn't be able to help her. Not like this. But he knew someone who could.

"Jake." He turned his attention to the boy. "I need you to hide. I'm going to try to move her. But if I can't, I'm going to have to get someone to help."

"Oh, I can help."

"No. You just hide. I'll get this."

"But what if those Taheen come back?"

Roland sighed.

Jake frowned. "I'll go."

"Just stay in the bushes past those trees over there." He pointed. "I'll let you know when it's clear."

Jake took off. Roland looked at Rachel really looked at her. He had only seen her this distraught before—when she had miscarried her baby.

"Rachel..." He put her hand on her stomach, "I need you to sit up. Can you sit up?"

"It hurts," she cried.

Roland rubbed her temple with his other hand. "What hurts? Tell me what hurts."

"My b-back."

Roland took a deep breath. "Can you sit up? Let me have a look?"

Rachel started to sit up, but cried out and lay back down. "Oh my God! It hurts!"

Roland couldn't stand it anymore. He jumped to his feet, his hands clenched at his sides. "Walter!" He turned around in a circle. "Walter! I know you can hear me! I know you're watching! You always are!"

Silence. The only sound that could be heard was Rachel's crying.

"Walter!"

How had it come to this? Roland relying on his mortal enemy to come to the rescue? He glanced over at Rachel. Her whole body seemed to shake from her sobs. Roland heard a rustling sound in the near distance and pulled his guns. Walter sauntered out of the trees. Roland pointed his guns straight at him.

"My how things have changed. You summoning me for help."

"Do you think I would have if there was another way?"

Roland wanted to pull the triggers so badly. But once again, it would do no good. Walter idly strolled up to him.

"Well now, that's half of my competition taken care of." He glanced down at Pennywise's still body. He glanced up at Roland. "Good job."

"I didn't kill him to help you," Roland said with a snarl. "He went after Rachel."

Walter finally turned his gaze towards her. "So much pain over that demon." He shook his head.

"Pain because of you too," said Roland.

"Nice to think that, isn't it?" Walter took a step towards Rachel, but Roland got between them, his guns still trained on his enemy. Walter stopped. "Come now, Roland, you called me here to see about the girl, now you're going to stop me," he said heatedly.

"Walter," Rachel called out weakly.

"I'm here, baby girl," Walter called back. "I don't think your friend trusts me though, even though he's the one who called me here." Then in a quieter voice, he said to Roland, "You think I would hurt

her while she's like this. Go ahead. Shoot me. We'll see how much longer she lasts without me now that she's struggling to find a reason to live."

"I will kill you one day, Walter. But not now. I can't help her. So today, only today, I want you to live. For her."

"Now finally there's something we can agree on."

Roland lowered his guns and moved aside. He gritted his teeth in frustration and disgust as Walter knelt next to Rachel.

((((O))))

"What's happenin', sweetheart?"

Rachel sobbed harder. Walter had come. She felt his hand on her brow. "Walter, it hurts so much."

"I know, sweetheart, but you need to relax. Think of our child."

"It's not just..." She hiccupped. "Something's wrong. Something's coming out of my back."

Walter's eyes grew wide. "Your back?"

"She's growing wings," Roland said heatedly. "I tried to move her, but she's in too much pain. It must be from that."

"Wings..." Walter muttered half to himself. Then louder he said, "Rachel, I'm going to turn you over now."

"No," she whimpered.

"Sweetheart...I need to check you out."

Rachel let out a shaky breath. She didn't even wait for Walter. She slowly turned over onto her side and her breath hitched in her throat at the pain.

((((O))))

Roland watched as Walter placed his hand on Rachel's arm. His other

hand disappeared behind her back. Roland gasped as Walter pulled his hand away.

His fingertips were covered in blood.

"The bones are sticking out of her back," Walter announced in a choked voice. "They must have come out when Pennywise tackled her."

Roland closed his eyes. "Can you help her? Take the pain away?"

"Of course. But it will only be temporarily. Unless..."

Roland inclined his head towards Walter. "Unless what?"

Walter turned to face Roland. "Unless her own powers are used to heal it."

Roland gave a nod. "Her powers that come from the Tower."

"Precisely."

Roland couldn't see Rachel's face which was hidden behind Walter, but he could only imagine the pain she was in. Pain that Roland was sick to death of seeing her in. Anger started to course through him.

"You expect her to be able to access her powers like this?"

"Not her." Walter reached into his coat pocket. "Me." He held up a black orb.

Roland's eyes grew wide. He had heard of Maerlyn's Rainbow or the Bends 'o the Rainbow, they were also called. He had specifically heard of the Black Bend.

"Walter, please do something."

Rachel's voice was so weak. She laid down on her stomach and rested her head on her arms. Good. Now for sure she wouldn't be able to see Pennywise. But she was still crying. Roland swallowed when he saw one of her wing bones sticking out of her back.

"I'm sure you've heard of Maerlyn's Rainbow," Walter told Roland. "Thirteen orbs of power..." he turned his gaze back to Rachel, "for thirteen guardians of the Tower."

"And you think this will help her?"

Walter placed his left palm flat in the middle of Rachel's back. "I'm taking her pain away now, but I can't heal her. The bones are going to need to finish growing out."

Rachel's sobbing started to lessen.

"Doing good, baby girl," Walter crooned. "Just relax. Breathe."

Rachel sniffled.

Walter rubbed her back. "Just lay here and rest. I'm just gonna go have a talk with Roland." He stuck the black orb back in his pocket.

"No!" Rachel's head shot up. She turned to look behind her. "Walter, please don't hurt him!"

"It's alright, Rachel," Roland called. "Just lie still for now."

To his relief, she put her head back down. Walter stood and came over to Roland.

"Tough times, old friend," Walter whispered.

"It never ends, I tell ya." Roland placed his hands on his hips. He shook his head while he watched Rachel. "But it will."

"You still think killing me is the answer?"

"She doesn't know what she's getting herself into."

"Oh I think she does." Walter said coolly. "Now maybe she didn't with him." He gestured with his chin towards Pennywise. "But we shall see."

"So you still intend to pursue her?"

"Well she doesn't exactly turn away from my embrace."

Walter winked at Roland. Roland had to clench his fists in order to not hit the sorcerer as he returned to Rachel. Roland didn't think he could possibly hate the man's guts any more than he always did.

He was wrong.

(((O)))

Rachel laid on the hard ground. Her back wasn't hurting her anymore, but she couldn't shake the feeling of sadness that had seeped into her being. She heard footsteps to her left.

Walter crouched down in front of her. "How are you, my love?"

"Walter, I don't know what to do anymore."

He put his hand on her head. "Give it time, sweet thing. You think you can get off of this ground now?"

Rachel sighed. Part of her wanted to get up. The other part of her wanted to just sink into the ground and disappear. She got on her side. Leaves clung to her gown. She got to her knees and started to turn her head to the left. Walter's hand reached out and grabbed her chin. He made her look at him.

"Eyes on me, pretty girl." He said gently.

Rachel did as she was told, never breaking her gaze with Walter as she stood. She remembered how just a few days before he had rubbed her arms, trying to get her to get comfortable with him. And without giving it a second thought, just like she did that day, she stepped up to him and rested against his chest. She put her arms around him and closed her eyes. He put his arms around her. They stood like that for a moment. Finally it was Walter who spoke first.

"You have survived your worst days."

"Barely."

She opened her eyes and a fresh tear leaked out.

"Then you're stronger than you realize."

"I don't know how to be strong without him. Even though we've gone our separate ways many times, just knowing that he was here...that he was around..." She gripped Walter's jacket as she started crying again. "I'm so sorry that I left you. I wasn't trying to get away. I was just so worried about Roland. He's been so good to me. You both have. I hate it that the two of you fight. I just wish there was another way."

Walter rested his chin on her head with a sigh.

"But there's only one way that I know, Rachel."

She pulled away from him, her eyes glistening with tears as she looked up at him. "Then maybe it's time we both start over."

She saw Walter swallow. He brought his hand up to caress her face. "Well I see you're all better now. Time for me to get back." He bent to kiss her forehead.

"But you're...you're leaving?"

"Yeah." He squeezed her shoulder.

"Walter...you can't leave me," she said desperately.

"But I have to. We both have things to take care of." He started to turn away from her.

She shifted from one foot to the other. "But I want to go with you."

He tilted his head towards her. "Sweetheart, you can't handle another trip like that."

"But I'll be with you!"

Her voice had come out louder than she intended. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Walter turned back to her. "Don't you try anything. 'Cause I'm going to have to hurt you this time if you do that."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "And no one's going to hear me scream. Blah



blah."

Walter gave her a sly grin. "That's my girl."

Then he turned and left. After he got several feet away, Rachel gasped. Her clothes were starting to change again. She watched the blue material change into a dark blue shirt. Black slacks formed on her legs. She shook her head. Classic Walter. Coming and going like a whirlwind. Except she didn't mind it so much with him, like she had with Roman.

Because when Walter did come.

It made her world just a little better of a place.

## 12. Chapter 12

A general feeling of numbness seemed to settle over Rachel the further they got into the woods. Soon day turned into twilight and the fog seemed to lift. Rachel's stomach growled. At one point, Jake stopped and pulled something off a large bush. He went to put it to his mouth.

"Don't eat that," Roland warned.

Jake turned to look at him, his hand midway to his mouth. "No good?"

"Don't trust anything in this forest. I'll find us something to eat."

Roland's hand brushed against Rachel's arm as he passed. She loved that he was always showing little signs that he was there for her, supporting her. After Walter had left, an uneasy silence had seemed to settle over the pair. Then they had gone and found Jake. One time, Rachel's eyes had accidentally settle on Pennywise, but she quickly averted them. And then of course she had started crying again. Roland had never said anything. And neither did Jake. They had just kind of given her space, which Rachel had been grateful for.

"The two of you stay here," Roland said, pulling Rachel out of her reverie.

He then left. And then there was silence. Rachel could hear crickets. She reached behind her and scratched at her back which was starting to itch. Probably from the dried blood.

Jake turned his attention to Rachel. "So now what?"

"We wait. That's all we can do?"

She sat. Jake followed suit.

"Sorry. I meant for you and Walter."

Rachel pulled her knees up to her chest. "I don't know. There's so much to think about. To consider. I mean, he's the father of my child.

And I do like him, I will admit that. I think we could be great together if I can get him to change his mind about the Tower."

"So the baby is Walter's."

Rachel regarded Jake coolly. "Yes."

He frowned. "Sorry."

"Hmph. You're the first person to tell me that. I know Walter's using kids to try to bring down the Tower, but you didn't see what my life was like before him. I was uh..." Rachel rested her cheek on her knee then lifted her head again. "This wasn't my first pregnancy. Let's just leave it at that."

Silence fell. Rachel listened to the crickets and for the footsteps that would herald Roland's return with food.

A while later, she felt someone shaking her. She opened her eyes. She was lying on her side. It was full dark outside. She was coved up with what she guessed was Roland's coat.

"Hey. You hungry? I cooked a rabbit."

Rachel glanced around groggily. "Hmmm I musta fell asleep."

"You did," Roland responded. "I didn't want to wake you until dinner was ready." He straightened. "You feel alright? Any nausea?"

"I'm fine." Rachel sat up.

Roland bent to pull some leaves out of her hair. Rachel didn't want to move. Her back was stiff from lying on the hard ground, but surprisingly the middle of it didn't hurt. Walter's healing powers must be really deep.

"So I guess we're staying here for the night."

"Yes," Roland replied.

He started taking the rabbit off the spit. He took out his knife and cut off pieces, handing them to both Rachel and Jake. The meat was

tough and tasted gamey, but Rachel wasn't even going to complain. After they ate, she sat next to the fire with Roland's coat covering her. She pulled it up to her neck.

"You cold?" Roland replied.

"Just getting comfortable."

The trio grew silent for a while. Jake stuck a stick in the dirt. He got another stick and started drawing a circle around it. He drew lines from the circle to the stick in the middle.

"What is that?" Rachel asked.

"The Tower." Roland answered for her.

"What is the Tower exactly?" Jake inquired.

Roland crouched next to him. "The Tower lies at the center of the universe. It protects us."

Jake glanced over at him. "From what?"

"Pennywise." Rachel answered. "And others like him. If the Tower falls, our world and many others will be overrun with demons."

Jake's face fell. "And that's what Walter wants?"

Roland nodded. "Yes."

"So he's forcing you to be with him," Jake told Rachel angrily. "That's what's really going on, right? He got you pregnant and now he's forcing you to be with him."

"Jake..." Rachel said softly, "It isn't like that. Walter saved me from Pennywise. I know he's not much better himself, but like I said earlier..."

Rachel stopped as the ground started to shake. She glanced around her apprehensively. "No. No."

She threw off Roland's coat and stumbled to her feet. Roland and

Jake did the same. And then she saw it. The beam. She had seen it only once. In a dream. But to see it in person. And to know what it meant.

She shook her head. "No..." she said in a hollow voice.

Walter was still trying to bring down the Tower. What was it going to take? What was she going to have to do to prove to him that this wasn't necessary? Rachel heard screaming noises coming from the beam. What did it mean? Finally the tremors stopped.

"Woah. That was just like at home," Jake said in awe.

"Beam quakes. They happen every time Walter tries to bring the Tower down," Roland responded.

Rachel didn't notice the gunslinger look her way. She was too busy lost in her own thought. Maturin had told her Walter was incapable of changing. Of course he had also told her that she and Pennywise were meant to be together. Which had also been true, if for however brief a time. Pennywise had been the catalyst for the chain of events that had led her down this crazy path. This wasn't about love anymore. That was gone now that Pennywise was dead. Hell this wasn't even about duty. Or loyalty. This was about the Tower. And about Rachel doing whatever she needed to do to defend it. Yes she did like Walter. Maybe was even starting to care for him. And now that one chapter in her life had been closed, it didn't really matter what happened to her from here on out. Maybe Walter needed to die. And maybe Roland was the one who needed to do it. But Roland's way was not her way. Rachel wasn't a gunslinger. She was a girl. A girl who had let herself get caught up in things that she knew absolutely nothing about. And maybe she was doing it once again with Walter. But at least she knew how to handle a demon. Hell she had had months of practice. Maybe that's why she had ended up with Pennywise. Maybe it had been more than her own nativity that had helped her to fall for him so easily. Maybe he had been a stepping stone on her path to a higher purpose.

The North Star. She put her hand up to her neck and fingered the choker. When Walter had magically transformed her night gown, her choker had returned. He had singled her out. And although at first,

things had been rocky between them, they were beginning to actually become friends. Maybe even something more. And he was always checking up on her. There had to be some good in him. Had to be. Hell even Pennywise had been capable of it.

A wave of tiredness hit her. She put her hand to her forehead and took a deep breath.

"Rachel?" Roland put his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm really tired. I think I'm going to go to sleep now."

Rachel's voice sounded robotic even to her own ears. She didn't notice the look that Roland and Jake exchanged. She grabbed Roland's coat and laid down, getting as comfortable as she could considering the hard ground and the two wing tips sticking out of her back. She had past given up trying to figure out what they meant. She thought of the picture Jake had shown of her with her full wings. And the sword. Why a sword? Rachel took a deep breath and sighed. She closed her eyes. Within moments she was asleep.

She was dead asleep when the gunshots went off. She jolted awake, her neck stiff from sleeping on the ground. The gunshots kept going. She clambered to her feet and took off in the darkness towards the sounds. Finally they stopped. She reached their source just in time to see a vast, shimmering red haze dissipate. She stopped. Jake and Roland were standing in a clearing right where the haze had been. Roland still had his guns pointed towards it.

"What was that? Was that something from the other side?" Jake asked.

Rachel could hear the fear in the boy's voice.

"Yes. That was a small tear. And they always try to come through after." Roland hoisted his guns. "Let's just hope none of them did get through."

He turned and froze when he saw Rachel.

She raised both eyebrows. "Well I guess I missed the excitement for once."

"You don't want to have to face this." Roland started walking towards Rachel. "This is just a taste of what will happen if Walter brings down the Tower."

He kept walking past her.

Rachel spread her hands. "Trying to make a joke. Jeez Louise," she muttered.

She rolled her eyes as she trudged after Roland. Rachel couldn't stop yawning as she followed Roland back to their campsite.

"How can you still be sleepy at a time like this? I'm wide awake," said Jake.

"My friend, when you've been through all I've been through, the near threat of demons doesn't even faze you. Wait 'til one actually shows up."

Roland held up a hand to stop her.

"What?" she asked.

Roland didn't respond right away. "I thought I heard something."

Rachel glanced around, a little more awake now. "Oh? Like a big something or a little something?"

"Big."

"Fuck," she muttered. Then with her voice raised, "Well I haven't had to fight anything in a few hours. I mean, who needs sleep anyway right?"

Rachel started to laugh, but it quickly died in her throat as she saw something move out of the corner of her eye. Something large on top of a fallen tree. The creature looked like some kind of large, lean cat. It raised its tail. A barbed tail. The creature bared its teeth.

"Oh come on," Rachel said as her posture drooped.

Roland pulled one of his pistols and at the same time, the creature

lunged. Rachel screamed, pushing Jake out of the way. The creature pounced on Roland and his gun went flying. The creature pinned Roland to a large tree. Rachel went for the gun and glanced up just in time to see the barbed tail come flying at her. It hit her and she went flying, once again landing on her back.

"This is getting old," she grumbled.

Jake came and helped her to her feet. As she stood, she heard Roland cry out. She jerked her head in that direction. Roland stabbed the creature in the back with a knife and the creature let out a screech. It backed off of Roland and as the creature moved, Rachel saw, to her horror, the creature pull its tail out of Roland's chest.

"You son of a fucking bitch!" She stretched her arms out forward, tried to feel the power. Nothing. "Wha-" The creature turned to her. She raised her arms above her head. "Come on, Maturin, give me something," she called out desperately. She strained harder. Then she felt it, the tingle at her fingertips. "Yes," she breathed.

Jake was faster. He lunged for the gun. The creature turned to him. He grabbed the gun. The creature started to advance and that was when Rachel hit him with a blast. It was a small one, and even that zapped the little bit of energy she had. She staggered. The creature let out a screech as it stumbled. Jake grabbed the gun and started shooting. The creature recoiled and took off at a run. Rachel staggered up to Roland, weakened. She could tell the gunslinger was in pain.

"Roland!"

"I'm alright."

His voice was stained. He slumped against the tree.

"The hell you are! Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." Roland clutched at his chest.

"You're full of shit is what you are. Did it stab you or-"

Roland pulled his hand away. Even in the dark, Rachel could see the



red spot on Roland's shirt. It was about the size of a poker chip. Rachel reached up to pull away Roland's shirt and he let her, a look of anxiety on his face. Sure enough, his chest was bleeding.

Rachel turned to Jake, who cast her a horrified glance.

Rachel gave a nod. "*Now* we panic."

## 13. Chapter 13

*Author's note: I'm baaaack! I am so sorry that I have been away for so long. Lot of personal stuff to take care of. But it's all good now. Sorry again, lovelies.*

Rachel woke to a faint growling sound. She groggily lifted her head. She had tried her best to not fall asleep the night before, but to no avail. The stress and grief of the last few days had just been too much for her.

She heard the growl again. "Roland, please tell me that was your stomach."

Her response was the sound of a gun being cocked.

"No. That was something else."

"Do you think it was bear?" Jake asked as he eagerly glanced around.

"Possibly," Roland replied.

Rachel sat up. "Must have been a pretty big bear."

"You'd be surprised."

Rachel watched Roland check his bullets. His brow was covered in a sheen of sweat.

"How you feeling?" she asked him.

"I'll be fine."

Rachel sighed. Why did men have to be so macho about everything? Roland's arm could have been hanging off and he would probably still try to use both guns.

"Well if there is a bear, there's no need to sit here and let it come to us," Rachel said tersely.

She threw off Roland's coat and stood, brushing the leaves off her.

"Probably not a good idea to go wandering around," said Roland.

"I'm a guardian of the Tower, Roland." Rachel bent to pick up Roland's coat. "You think I'm going to be worried about some stupid forest animal?"

He frowned at her and got to his feet. Rachel didn't mean to sound so defensive. She was just tired. Tired of being the damsel in distress. Tired of men telling her what to do. She thought of Pennywise. She missed his towering, comforting embrace. She missed the good times. But something had eventually changed. Something had shifted between them that had had nothing to do with the fact that he had threatened her family. Being in Mid-World had thrown him off balance. But was it just that, or had there been something else? Something besides her gunslinger protector? She and Roman had never really discussed it.

And now because of her former mate's animalistic, possessive ways, they would never get that chance again.

They set off again, and before too long, Rachel heard the sound of rushing water.

"If that is what I think it is, you guys may have to avert your eyes," Rachel commented snidely.

Sure enough, a creek came into view.

"Oh ho, yes!" Rachel hollered. "Sweet, beautiful, blessed water."

She ran forward and dropped to the knees next to the creek. Right away, she bent forward, cupping her hands. She splashed some of the cool, fresh water on her face. Then she scrubbed her face with the palms of her hands. She scrubbed at her neck, then washed her hands. Then she drank.

"Roland," she said between desperate gulps, "please tell me you're filling your water skin."

"I am."

Rachel knelt for a moment and watched the water trickle past. She

glanced at their surroundings and heaved a deep, contented sigh. Sure enough, to her right, Roland was filling his water skin.

"How's your shoulder?" she asked.

"Same."

She frowned. "Need me to look at it? And please don't tell me you're fine again. I may just have to drown you."

Roland glared at her out the corner of his eyes. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Someone's in a good mood."

"Good enough." Rachel dried her hands on her pants and stood. "Can I take a look on your shoulder?"

"No."

Roland set his water skin aside and drank from the creek. Rachel jutted her hip out.

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"Would you let me check out your wound?"

"Yes. You know I would," she replied testily.

Roland sighed. Rachel went around him and knelt. He opened his shirt.

"Holy shit, Roland."

Purple veins snaked out around Roland's wound.

"You need to see about that."

Roland closed his shirt again, his face in a frown and his eyes staring straight ahead.

"Kind of hard to do that around here."

"Well you could at least try to clean it out. That's what I would do anyway."

"No, you wouldn't even be in this predicament." Roland's eyes met hers. "You would have stopped it."

"Yeah sure." Rachel gave him a wry smirk. "Messed up girl with her crazy powers."

"You're not a monster, Rachel. You know that."

"No, I just breed with them," came her dismal reply.

The pair sat quietly for a moment. Finally, Rachel gave Roland's arm a gentle squeeze.

"We better get moving," she said. "Let me just get another drink."

She bent down to the creek again. She was lifting her second handful to her mouth, when she felt a vibration in the earth. The water in her hands trembled. She drank. The ground shook again. Rachel heard something that sounded like a bunch of birds. She glanced up at the trees. Sure enough, a large flock of birds flew out, above the trees. The ground shook again, harder this time.

"Roland."

Rachel put her hand on Roland's arm.

"We need to leave. Make for the cover of the trees," the gunslinger said.

He motioned to Jake and the trio ran for shelter. Rachel glanced back to see the trees on the other side of the creek shake. Something massive was moving through the woods.

"Shit! Shit!"

Rachel scrambled behind a tree, but Roland grabbed her, pulling her with him to their right.

Behind another tree.

Roland's shoulder was up against hers, to her left. And then Rachel glanced around frantically.

"Where's Jake?"

"I don't know," came Roland's fearful reply. "But we can't move now. He might see us."

"He?" Rachel said dubiously.

"Shhh."

The ground shook again. And this time, Rachel shook with it. Whatever it was was right even with them. Rachel froze, her back against the tree, afraid to even breathe. She heard the trees move behind them, followed by the sound of heavy, gravelly breathing—coming from way, way too high up.

There was a lot of rustling and creaking noises, and then she heard sniffing.

Sniffing.

Rachel put her hand over her mouth.

If whatever this creature was couldn't hear her heart about to explode, she would have been shocked. Neither she nor Roland budged.

And then the trees started rustling again. The sniffing stopped. Rachel started to breathe a sigh of relief when-

*CRASH!*

Rachel screamed and threw her hands over her head as branches rained down on top of her and Roland.

"Run, Rachel!" Roland hollered.

Rachel never had to be told twice.

She ran.

And eardrum shattering roar sounded behind her. She heard more rustling in the trees and then gunshots. Rachel didn't dare to look

back. What looked like giant swords swiped at the trees to her left, shredding them to kindle. Rachel brought up an arm to shield her face. A shadow passed in front of her and then a giant paw swooped down.

Rachel stopped short. The paw was much taller than she was and she had no time to react as the fingers started to curl around her, blocking her escape. She whirled around and froze, and stared up.

And up.

The bear was even taller than the trees. Roland still fired at it, but it wasn't doing any good. Rachel felt the paw against her back and tried to run, only to be blocked again by its sword like claws. She felt the urge to fly away.

Only she had no wings.

Just a couple of useless, painful stumps.

But there was something else she did have. Her magic. She sent out a blast, striking the bears fingers. The bear hollered and lifted its paw. Rachel ran to Roland, who had just run out of bullets.

"That was totally useless," she hollered at him.

"I knew it wouldn't kill him," he said. "I was just hoping he would let you go."

"Well we can't run from it. What are we going to do?"

The bear roared at her.

Rachel whirled around, her hands into fists, and hollered back.

The bear tilted its head at her. Rachel noticed a strange contraption attached to the top of its head, like a satellite. But that wasn't all. In place of where a live bear's hand should be, the left hand was completely metal. On its right forearm, a large patch of what was supposed to be flesh was exposed. Metal cables ran underneath.

"What...in Maturin's name...is that?" Rachel asked, her eyes glued on

the monstrosity before her.

"His name is Shardik," Roland said. "He is one of the Guardians."

Rachel breathed a heavy sigh of relief. A Guardian? She furrowed her brow in thought. Originally, she had thought the bear was trying to kill them. He could have crushed her easily. Or picked her up and ate her. But the way the bear stared at her...it was like he had recognized her somehow.

Rachel held her hand out, palm forward and took a couple of steps towards Shardik.

"My name is Rachel," she called out. "I am a friend to Maturin. The Turtle."

Shardik growled softly. Rachel kept slowly advancing towards him.

"I am a Guardian of the Tower like you."

Shardik leaned in towards her. Rachel jumped back in shock and Roland put his hand on her arm protectively. Shardik cocked his head sideways at her.

"R-Rachel," came his gravelly voice.

Rachel smiled. She gave a nod. "That's right. Rachel. Rachel Porter. And this is Roland." She gestured at the gunslinger. "He's a friend to the Dark Tower also. A gunslinger."

"The Tower...is in danger," Shardik annunciated.

Rachel frowned. "I know. And I'm trying to stop that. Both of us are. There is a village that we are trying to get to. Can you help us get there? Protect us?"

"Your magic...protects you. But it is...tainted."

*Shit*, Rachel thought.

"I know. I'm sorry. That wasn't my fault." And it really wasn't. First Rachel had imprinted on Pennywise against her will, and then



Walter. "But I am trying to do what is right. To save the Tower. To save my daughter. I'm sure you'll meet her if you haven't already. If we succeed."

A dark cloud of sadness and concern filled Rachel's mind. Would she ever see Eleanor again? And what about her wings? What would she turn into if they succeeded in stopping Walter?

And what would happen to her if she failed?

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Rachel bit into a piece of rabbit. "I can't believe we met one other Guardians."

"I can't believe he let us pass through," Jake said with a grin. He also had a rabbit in his hands.

Roland poked the fire. "We're not out of the woods yet. Physically or metaphorically."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "You know," she took another bite, "you could for once look on the bright side of things."

Roland looked at her. Rachel grinned, her mouth full of rabbit.

"She's right. I mean, we all made it this far," Jake said.

"And you wouldn't *believe* some of the stuff I went through before I got here. And that was in my own world."

"Was Pennywise that bad?" Jake asked.

"He wasn't that good. And I was stupid enough to fall for it."

"You're not stupid. I told you that," Roland said.

*Then why am I walking into the same predicament again, just with my eyes open this time,* Rachel wanted to say.

To save Eleanor. Rachel had long passed realized that she didn't care what happened to herself anymore. She still missed her daughter. It was like a gaping hole in her chest that would probably never heal.

"You know, I've been thinking," Rachel said. "All the Guardians are animals. And I'm the only human. Well...humanish."

"But you're growing wings," Jake said.

"Exactly. What if that's what's happening to me? What if to become a full Guardian, I have to acquire an," she made air quotes, "animal attribute?"

"Angels have wings," Roland reminded her.

Rachel scowled. "So do some demons."

"Hey, when I first had that vision about you, the one where you were in the Tower, you had some sort of glow about you. Some kind of aura."

"That was my Tower magic. I've done that before," Rachel told Jake.

"Yeah. But it was weird. It reminded me of a phoenix almost."

"You've said that before. What is a...phoenix," Roland inquired.

"It's a bird of fire. Like it's not actually made of fire, but that's still its element. And when it dies, it's reborn from its own ashes," Rachel said. She was going to take another bite, but then stopped as a thought occurred to her. "You know what's weird? I played as Cinderella in my town's play a few months ago." She glanced back and forth at the two guys to see if either one of them would catch on, but they both just sat there, waiting for her to continue. "The name Cinderella literally means girl who sits among the ashes."

"Woah. That is pretty cool." Jake's face lit up.

"And I have literally died and come back to life a couple of times," Rachel continued.

"So you are like a phoenix then," Roland concluded.

"Yes." Rachel grinned. "The phoenix of the Dark Tower."

Jake met her with a conspirituous grin. "The Dark Phoenix."

Rachel felt her spirits lift. It was so fitting. Walter had a special title that he was known by. A name that suited him in every sense of the phrase.

And now so would she.